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LADY JAGUAR, THE ROBBER QUEEN.

A ROMANCE OF THE BLACK CHAPARRAL.

BY CAPTAIN MARK WILTON.



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Lady Jaguar, THE ROBBER QUEEN.

A Romance of the Black Chaparral.

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CHAPTER I.

THE MIDNIGHT RESCUE.

NIGHT, dark and dreary, was over the earth, and in the little village of San Pedro the wayfarer could scarcely find his way along the narrow streets. At the best, there was no moon, and the heavy clouds shut out what light the stars might otherwise have given.

San Pedro, at the time of which we write, ranked as a third-rate town of Mexico, but it lay at such a point that several government buildings had been erected, among them a grim and frowning fort.

The fort was the pride of the village people. It stood head and shoulders, as it were, above all its neighbors, and it was often pointed out as an impregnable and magnificent building, but at this day, and in our own country, it would cause no other feeling than amusement.

On this dark night, two men were standing near the rear wall of the fort. There was nothing about them to show that they were guardians of the place, and had any one been watching them, they would have marked a furtiveness which spoke ill for their good intentions.

Plain it was that they were on some secret mission, for, though it was neither cold nor wet, they wore their broad-brimmed *sombreros* so low over their faces, and their cloaks so high up on their chins, that no one could possibly recognize them.

There seemed little danger of discovery. San Pedro had no police, and on such a night the majority of the citizens preferred to remain indoors; but the men moved cautiously and spoke in whispers.

"It is time Roldan was here," said one.

"Curse the fellow! why is he so tardy? It is not safe for us to wait here. A guard may at any moment make a circuit of the fort."

"I have little fear of that. They are little given to such precautions and the hour is late."

"Nevertheless, delay is dangerous."

"I wish the work was over; this suspense makes me nervous, Alberto. My future hangs poised on a narrow chance to-night, and the outlook is not favorable."

"I see nothing to prevent success if the half-breed has done his work well and we are not discovered. Once get our ladder hung from the window and all is well. Leon will jump at the chance to escape, and, once outside, the game is in our own hands."

"It will make a good deal of talk, and some one may take the trouble to ask if I was at home during the night."

"You can easily prove that you were. Have no fear, Manuel."

"It would have been far wiser to have removed him without all this useless plotting."

"We have made a mistake, I admit, but the idea was your own."

Manuel was about to reply, but just then the sound of a soft footstep caused them to turn, and a third person glided to the spot. He was dressed like them, and in his hands he bore a bundle of some kind.

"You are late, Roldan," said Alberto, sharply.

"It is better to be slow and do well than to be swift and do ill," was the calm reply.

"Have it your own way, only let us lose no more time. You have the ladder?"

"The ladder, the lasso and the garments," Roldan replied, laying the bundle on the ground.

"Make haste, then."

Roldan had knelt upon the ground, and unrolling the package, he lifted several articles one after the other.

"Here is the ladder, here the *sombrero*, here the *serape* and here the lasso," he calmly said. "You shall now see that I made no idle boast when I said I could lasso the bars of the window above."

He stood erect with the lasso in his hands and looked upward. Thirty feet above was a small window, but in the darkness it seemed an impossibility to fix the cord upon it. Roldan, however, was a veteran at the work, and

in the further end of the cord he had placed a stout hook for this particular occasion.

Stepping back a pace, he swung the lasso for a moment around his head and then cast one end upward. Alberto and Manuel had expected it to fall down again, but to their surprise, and, very likely, as much to Roldan's, it held fast.

"See!" said the latter, with a calm smile of triumph, "the first attempt succeeds. The half-breed is no child."

"But can you climb the cord?" demanded Manuel, eagerly.

"There are knots at frequent points. I can climb it."

So saying, he cast off his outer garments and stood erect, a lithe, sinewy young man whose appearance showed him to be of mixed Mexican and Indian blood.

He laid hold of the lasso, tested its strength, and then began to move upward, his only support being the knots to which he clung with hands and feet cunningly placed.

His companions looked on eagerly. Neither of them could have accomplished such a feat, and in this case they could do no more than to hold the bottom of the lasso steady, but the half-breed went steadily upward until he touched the window and had a better support.

Everything had been planned in advance, and, without losing any time, he rattled the bars of the window and then listened.

All remained silent, and he repeated the act, but still there was no response.

"Don Leon! Don Leon!" he cautiously said.

This time there was an answer, and a voice, sounding so quickly and so near the inside of the window as to almost startle Roldan, eagerly asked:

"Who is there?"

"Hush!" said the half-breed. "We are friends, but you must make no noise."

"Why are you there?"

"To rescue you, Don Leon."

"It cannot be done. The window is too strongly barred."

"A fig for the bars; you shall see how I will wrench them away. But, Don Leon, I am clinging by a tiresome hold. Take the end of this lasso and pull it inside your cell, and a rope ladder will follow on which I can easily stand."

The man inside was quick of comprehension, and as he promptly obeyed the order, the ladder crept up the wall and was soon secured. The half-breed breathed a sigh of relief as he rested his feet upon it.

"Is it you, Roldan?" asked the unseen.

"Yes, Don Leon."

"Who is with you?"

"Your cousin, Manuel, and Alberto Pareja."

"May the Virgin bless you all. If I escape, you shall be well rewarded."

"I do not doubt it, Don Leon. Now I will wrench away the bars. Men say this fort is strong, but I will show you how they lie."

"Quick, good Roldan! I am no coward, but my life is worth too much to others to have it taken from me without cause."

The half-blood did not answer. Already he was twisting away at the iron bars, using a short steel rod he had brought for that purpose, and the truth of his last assertion was soon proved as one of the impediments gave way.

He kept on, while Alberto and Manuel stood below, softly conversing, and Don Leon urged the worker on, and one after another of the bars was removed until the window was clear.

"Now, Don Leon," said Roldan, cheerfully, "you have only to crawl through and follow me down the ladder. Your friends have horses in waiting and you will soon be beyond the power of your enemies. That's it; here you are. Carefully, now, for a tumble would do you no good. Now, then, down you go."

By this time Don Leon was through the window, and following the half-blood down the rope-ladder. They soon reached the ground, and Manuel and Alberto each caught a hand of the rescued man.

"Praise the Virgin!" ejaculated Manuel, fervently.

"Welcome, Don Leon, welcome!" added Alberto.

"My dear friends," said the late prisoner, warmly, "I can never find words to thank you, but I pray that your reward may come from a higher power. This I will say, however—my life is dear to me, and some day I hope to repay this debt in full."

"Say no more, cousin, say no more!" replied Manuel. "It was a labor of love, and our re-

ward is in our victory. This is no time for words, however; we are liable to be discovered here and that would ruin us all. Let us away, at once. You must of course flee from here for the time, and for that purpose we have horses in waiting."

"You have done all things well."

"Good Roldan, we shall need you no more at present. Here is your reward, and the sooner you return to your cabin the better."

The half-breed received the gold handed to him but still hesitated.

"Hadn't I better go further, seniors? There may be fighting, and my arm is strong."

"No, no, my faithful friend. Our policy is to flee, not fight, and we shall avoid all trouble. Hasten to your home," said Manuel, kindly.

"So be it, seniors, and may good luck go with you," said Roldan, as he gathered up his cast-off garments.

While he was replacing them, Manuel was assisting Don Leon to put on the hat and cloak they had brought him, and then all was ready for the start.

Roldan went first and soon disappeared in the darkness, and then the trio started in a nearly opposite direction.

"It pains me to take this step," said Don Leon. "I never in my life had one thought which was traitorous to Mexico, and it seems like admitting the charges to flee from my accusers."

"You go to save your life, cousin, and this affair will soon blow over. In their cooler moments no one will think of accusing Leon Villena of being a conspirator against his country, but, until then, you must keep out of sight. Think of your wife and daughter."

"I do think of them, and it is for them I flee. My loving Juana and little Luisa must not mourn the loss of husband and father. You will care for them while I am away, Manuel?"

"I will, cousin; tenderly, and as a brother should. Fear nothing, Leon."

"Were it not for them I would remain and face these dastards who dare call me a traitor. Have you learned their names yet, Manuel?"

"They are not yet known."

"The cowards! They are like a man who stabs another in the back."

"Your day will come," said Alberto.

"It will, most surely. Some time I will return and pay them to the uttermost limit. My day will come," was the firm response. "But where are we going? Here is the river, but I see no horses. Are you going by water?"

The trio had left the village half a mile behind. They stood in intense darkness, close beside the rapid stream, and there was something suspicious in the manner of Manuel and Alberto.

Unseen by Leon, they had exchanged secret and ominous gestures, and could he have seen their faces he would have been startled at their expressions.

In answer to the last question, Pareja pointed to the right.

"Don't you see the horses, Don Leon?" he pleasantly asked.

The late prisoner looked in the direction indicated, and then, as he turned his head, Manuel suddenly raised one hand, holding in it something which was like a club, and with full force struck at the doomed man's head.

Had it fallen fairly the skull would have been crushed, but poor calculation and the darkness temporarily saved his life and he uttered a cry as he fell.

"*Madre de Dios!* What would you do?" he wildly demanded.

For answer, Manuel flung himself upon him, grasping his throat, and as Alberto came to his aid, stout cords soon held the betrayed man's limbs firmly.

He had ceased to struggle, knowing its uselessness, but his eyes were fixed burningly on Manuel.

"What would you do?" he again demanded, as his throat was freed.

"I would remove you forever from my path," was the merciless reply.

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that I want *casa Villena*, and that, while you live, it is beyond my reach."

"*Madre de Dios!* You would not commit a murder to obtain it?"

"I would and will, if so you call it. Yonder river is to be your grave, so you may as well say your prayers at once."

"Manuel, cousin, what horrible jest is this?"

"It is no jest, but dead earnest."
 "We are wasting words," interrupted Pareja. "Pick him up and give the body to the water."
 They raised their victim, but he huskily exclaimed:
 "Have mercy, for the sake of my wife and child!"
 "I care nothing for them," retorted Manuel, brutally. "In with him, Alberto!"
 The doomed man began another wild appeal, but it ended in a shriek as they cast him from them to the bosom of the water.
 Then followed a splash, and Leon Villena disappeared in the swift current of the river.

CHAPTER II.

A FATEFUL ADVENTURE.

THE attention of the reader is now called to a time ten years later than the events of the last chapter, and a place miles away from San Pedro—in brief, the coast of Mexico, where the ocean washes the untilled land and the few inhabitants gain a living by fishing and like pursuits.

At the place to which attention is called, a narrow beach borders the water, and directly in the rear arises a rocky bluff, for the most part thickly wooded and rather attractive in a rugged way.

Beyond the land the water is for some distance shallow, and a dozen small islands may be seen, some sandy and barren, others wooded and alive with tropical luxuriance and birds.

Such was the scene which was looked idly over by a man who sat upon a rock at the top of the bluff, and his indolent manner was in unison with the quiet of the place.

Personally, the man looked out of his element in this rude bit of Mexican territory, for the first glance would show that he was neither a fisherman nor Mexican; his fair complexion, blue eyes and light brown hair were not common to the Spanish race, and his neat, American dress was equally a marvel there.

Whatever the man was, he did not seem worried by his surroundings. His face bore a look of lazy indifference, and, though he held a rifle between his knees, he plainly apprehended no occasion to use it.

Mexico, however, is a land of surprises in almost every sense, and this lazy young man on the rock was suddenly startled into life and energy.

A shout from the direction of the water drew his gaze in that direction, and, very much to his surprise, he saw two canoes speeding toward the beach. They had just rounded the point of an island, and the first glance showed him they were nearing the end of a hot and ominous chase.

The character of the several occupants was the chief surprise for the observer. In the first canoe, which was only a tiny craft, a dark-haired girl sat alone and wielded her paddle with the energy of desperation, while in the second were eight or nine of the savages of a tribe of Indians which flourished along the coast.

The sight brought the observer at once to his feet and his indolent air vanished at the same time. He had heard of these savages before, and their pursuit of the girl needed no explanation.

"By Jupiter! here is a chance for an adventure," he exclaimed aloud. "I won't sit here and see those copper hounds gobble up a white girl. She is only a fisherman's daughter, but a Mexican is better than an Indian, any day."

The last words were uttered as he went bounding down the bluff, and he saw with pleasure that the course of the fugitive was taking her directly toward him.

He did not pause to think of the danger he was himself daring. He had a good rifle, a pair of revolvers and a bowie-knife, and this was not the first time he had met danger when it might have been avoided.

Only a short distance separated the savages from their intended prey, and, comprehending that it was the intention of the girl to at once seek refuge in the wood upon the bluff, her prospective champion prepared to second her efforts.

His perfect coolness enabled him to take in all the points of the situation. He saw that he had not yet been discovered by either party, and, waiting until the smaller canoe was just on the point of touching land, he suddenly threw up his rifle, aimed at one of the savages and fired.

The report rung out sharply on the air and an impressive tableau followed.

The girl had heard the report too late to remain in the canoe; a quick bound had carried her to the beach where she stood in momentary irresolution, while in the larger craft seven Indians sat looking stupidly at one of their companions who lay prostrate in the canoe, the blood trickling forth from a wound in his dark breast.

It was a momentary respite which the rescuer was not slow to improve.

"This way, child!" he shouted, in the Mexican language. "Come to me and I will save you!"

By that time the girl had seen him and a look of joy passed over her face, and then her champion breathed freer as he saw she was not slow of comprehension.

Almost before his last word was uttered, she was running toward him, but just as he grasped her arm a chorus of furious yells arose from the savages and their paddles again touched water.

"Come with me, senorita," said the white man, quickly but calmly. "I am well-armed, and, once in yonder bushes, the dogs will find hard work to take us."

"May the Virgin bless you!" breathed the girl, in the softest of Spanish; and then they started up the bluff.

The hideous yells of the savages acted as an incentive, and the fair fugitive again showed her courage by giving no sign of dismay; so the ascent was made much quicker than her champion had expected, and by the time the canoe touched the beach they were at the top.

"We will go no further at present," said the American. "This bluff is hard to climb and my revolvers will pick them off before they can gain the level."

"Oh, senor!" she answered, "do you know what these men are?"

"Red-skins and rascals, I should say," he coolly answered, as he cocked both revolvers and held one in each hand ready for use.

"They are cannibals, senor."

"They will never make a meal on my flesh."

"But they are seven to one!"

"True, but I hold the trump cards. Twelve shots from these weapons will reduce the majority."

The girl was given no time for further words. The savages had darted across the beach and were by that time at the foot of the bluff. The American surveyed them coolly. They were lithe, sinewy fellows, with abundant muscle and repulsive faces, but with the reckless bravery peculiar to him he still remained undismayed.

The red-skins began leaping from rock to rock up the ascent, and the man with the revolvers waited no longer. He aimed at the foremost and the fellow staggered, fell, and then rolled backward toward the level.

Click! The hammer was raised again. Crack! A second bullet sped on its way and a second savage fell.

The double tragedy had its effect. The enemy were half-way up the bluff, but they hesitated in mingled fear and confusion. Probably they had never before encountered a revolver.

If they were irresolute, such was not the case with the American. Again he fired, this time discharging both weapons at once, and as each dropped its man, his accuracy as a marksman was established.

Four savages had gone rolling down the bluff, but the scene then abruptly changed. The surviving trio suddenly swerved to the left and in a twinkling had the cover of the bushes to shelter them.

"Bend your head low down," said the composed American, addressing the girl. "These fellows may yet prove dangerous. Confound them! they don't dare to fight me openly."

His direction was obeyed, and the girl lay looking at him with evident wonder. Brave she unquestionably was herself, but such matter-of-fact heroism as this was something new to her. There were few men who would care to fight three cannibals, openly or otherwise.

"If you see a head, let me know," continued the defender. "I don't hear the red hounds and they are probably planning mischief."

The last word had hardly passed his lips when he suddenly pushed his revolver forward and fired. Then he uttered an exclamation of disgust.

"Missed the dog, by thunder! But, never mind; I'll do better next time. Are there any more of these neighborly varmints around here?"

"I do not know, senor. I was out in my canoe when I chanced upon this party and was pursued, as you saw. They seldom come near us, for their home is many miles above."

"Can you see their canoe?"

She parted the leaves and looked over the bluff.

"I can see where it was, but it is no longer there. Can it have drifted away?"

"Not without aid. They have beat a retreat."

"Praise the Virgin! you are right. See! the canoe is just passing around the island with the three savages aboard."

The American thrust his revolvers into his belt and indulged in a quiet laugh.

"My batteries were too much for them. They can get away with a supper of human flesh, but lead is not to their liking. Yes, they are gone, and gone for good, which makes us masters of the situation. The game is decided in our favor."

CHAPTER III.

BARBARA.

THE speaker assisted the girl to arise, his manner being as full of courtesy as though she was a princess.

"We can now leave here in safety, though I hardly think it best to go by water. Those fellows might waylay us. Can't I hide your canoe in the bushes where it can be recovered?"

"If you think best," she replied. "My home is a mile below here, near the shore, and I can easily walk the distance."

"Then we will descend the bluff at once."

He gave her his arm, and they were soon on the beach. The victims of the affray lay doubled up among the rocks, but there was little in such wretches to excite pity, and they were left where they fell.

The girl waited while her rescuer secreted her canoe. He then returned, noticing for the first time that she was rarely beautiful, and the sight filled him with wonder.

"Can it be that she is only a fisher-girl?" he thought. "Such loveliness is worthy of the king's court, and she is as intelligent as lovely."

He smiled as he joined her, and lightly said:

"We have now only to go, senorita. If it is not asking too much, I would like to walk with you to your home. There is a bare chance that the man-eaters may have landed."

"I shall be pleased to have your company, but will it not cause you inconvenience?"

"Not in the least. I have unlimited leisure and shall be glad to make myself of use to some one. Allow me to introduce myself. I am an American by birth, a native of the State of New York, and my name is Edgar Lewis."

"And mine is Barbara," she said, frankly. "My father is Pedro Lopez, a fisherman, of whom you may have heard. He will be glad to see you at our cabin but it is a rude place for one like you."

"For one like me? Senorita, do not commit a mistake at the beginning of our acquaintance. I am not of noble blood or distinction, but merely a restless, aimless wanderer over the world. A man who has no aim in life is not deserving of great honor, and I beg that you will not over-estimate me."

"At any rate, you are brave and good. You have saved my life, for which I thank you sincerely and pray that the blessing of the saints may be yours."

"I could have no greater reward," Edgar gallantly declared.

By this time they were walking along the beach, and Barbara related at greater length how her adventure had transpired.

She had been accustomed to go out in her canoe and never before had she been molested by the cannibals. These wretches were few in number and little heeded by the white settlers, of whom they were greatly in fear; but the sight of the unprotected girl had probably been too great a temptation and they gave chase as has been related.

While she talked, Edgar grew more and more surprised. Although an American, he was thoroughly at home in the Spanish language, and when he saw how perfect was her own use of the melodious tongue, the contrast between her language and that of the rude fisherman whom he had met during his brief stay in the vicinity was really marvelous.

In due time they reached the cabin, a small affair which nestled at the foot of a cliff, and

in a short space he found himself shaking hands with Pedro Lopez and his wife.

If he had expected to find food for further wonder in them, he was disappointed; they were as unlike Barbara as can be imagined. In them he found the typical dwellers of the coast, rude and unlearned people, but, if he read them aright, they were less treacherous and selfish than most of their race.

They thanked him again and again for what he had done, and when he saw that they seemed to almost idolize their daughter, he gave them a place in his heart as people of good taste.

An hour later, he took his leave. He had been in no haste to go, for, somehow, he liked to look at Barbara and listen to her melodious voice, but they had asked him to call again—an invitation he had no idea of refusing.

He walked away from the cabin like one in a dream. In his wandering, pleasure-seeking life he had met many fair women, but never before had he been impressed as by this queen of the cabin.

She was a riddle he could not solve. Education was almost a myth in that region, but Barbara was all that was intelligent, graceful and well-bred. A well-educated man abhors an ignorant woman, but Barbara gave proof of thorough study and much reading, and how a fisherman's daughter could be such a marvel he could not understand.

"Call again? Most surely I will," he muttered, aloud. "I want to know more of this girl, and if future interviews impress me as favorably as this has done, I may not leave here a week hence."

Perhaps it may properly be explained by the simplest answer in the world, but people often wonder what strange fate led them to certain places, or brought them in contact with certain persons; and so Edgar Lewis fell to wondering why he had come to this uninviting part of Mexico.

He had seen twenty-five years of life, and, during the last four had wandered extensively in Great Britain, France, Spain, Italy and India, coming, last of all, to Mexico. He had then taken a fancy to pass a week or two among the humble coast people, and the result was this meeting with Barbara.

He went to the home of the fisherman where he was staying and was outwardly the same as ever; but, while he talked with old Francisco, his mind was ever on the events of the afternoon, and when he slept at night it was to dream that the girl had proved to be a princess in disguise.

The night passed, and at an early hour he was astir. He had conceived a brilliant idea while he lay on his humble couch and was not slow to make use of it. He wished to call again at Pedro Lopez's cabin, and where could he find a better excuse than by taking home Barbara's canoe?

A brisk walk of half an hour took him to the bluff, which he found without visible sign of human life, but that the man-eaters had again been there was proved by the absence of the bodies left there on the previous occasion.

The canoe had not been disturbed, and, setting it afloat, he entered and paddled along the coast.

Half the distance had been passed when, glancing ashore, he saw Barbara walking in an opposite direction. He called to her, turned the craft toward land, and she came down to the water's edge to meet him.

"I hope you won't think I am stealing your canoe," he lightly said. "It is tempting enough, I admit, but I was only taking it home."

"For which you have my thanks," she replied, smiling. "I had feared the Indians would find it and was on my way to thwart them, but you have saved me the trouble."

"Were you really going to venture near that place again?" he asked, his face growing grave.

"And why not, pray?"

"Because of the danger you would dare."

She had stood before him, gloriously lovely with her perfect form and face, the gayest of smiles resting upon her countenance, but at his last words the smile vanished and in its place came a look which was hard and bitter and which made her seem almost like another person.

"Danger?" she echoed, with an inflection he could not interpret. "And do you think, señor, that danger is new to me?"

Her manner more than her words, made

Edgar feel confused, as though he had touched upon a vague yet evident subject which should have been avoided, but he managed to reply:

"I merely referred to the fact that by going there you would risk a danger which might be avoided."

"Perhaps it would be as well if those wretches had captured me the other day."

"You do not know their brutality, señorita."

"There are others more brutal than they—people who torture brain and heart as well as body. But there, Señor Lewis, I am talking foolishly. Let us say no more about it."

The old smile came back to her face, but Edgar saw that it cost her an effort, and he stood minus his usual self-possession to a degree which surprised him.

"Will the canoe hold us both?" she lightly asked, looking at the egg-shell in the water.

"I think it will, and, if you will trust to my poor ability, I will be pleased to paddle you home or wherever you wish to go."

"I told them at home I would not be gone long, and I suppose my mother will worry if I do not return soon. Let us go, and afterward I will show you some of our natural scenery, if you wish."

"It will please me greatly," Edgar answered; and then both entered the canoe, and he began paddling leisurely homeward.

Barbara had suddenly become gayer than he had ever before seen her, and they laughed and chatted like children as they went. Her new mood was as charming as the previous ones, and every moment Edgar Lewis grew more and more interested. The threads of the web of fate were slowly weaving themselves around him.

CHAPTER IV.

SUNSHINE AND CLOUDS.

EDGAR paddled very slowly during the return, but so short a distance was soon passed, and they landed opposite the cabin. Barbara showed him where to house the canoe, and then they went for a ramble among the bluffs back of the dwelling.

It was an occasion long to be remembered. The day was perfect, and Barbara was in such high spirits that the American was happy and bewildered at the same time. She seemed free from every care, and her joyous conversation and laughter was so contagious that he forgot everything but the pleasure of the hour and was like one suddenly transferred to an Eden.

It was near midday when he bade her good-day at the door of her home and walked toward his own quarters. Just then he was not in a mood for reflection, but after he had eaten dinner he, after the manner of his sex, wandered to a retired spot, lighted his pipe, and sat down to reflect.

This he had done for the express purpose of analyzing his new acquaintance. Man-like, he had always believed he thoroughly understood the opposite sex, but his experience was not a solitary one when, at the end of an hour, he was frank enough to acknowledge to himself that he had met one whom he could not understand at all.

Yes, Barbara was beyond his comprehension. In the first place, she was, for that region, a marvel of intelligence and grace, and having seen her in several diversified moods, he was unable to form an idea of her exact character.

"By Jupiter! she is too much of a riddle for me, but I will stay here long enough to know her better. If I were to leave now I should never be satisfied, and if she continues to give me her favor, I shall kill time in an agreeable way. And after that, what?" he slowly continued, after a pause. "Every moment with her deepens my interest, and if the tide does not turn it will be hard to go by-and-by."

The pipe went out as he held it listlessly in his hand, and he sat gazing off on the water with a fixed stare indicative of deep thought.

Perhaps he was contrasting the social position of Barbara and himself—he, a man of education and wealth; she, an humble fisherman's daughter; but, if so, he had been dull enough had he failed to know she was in every way his intellectual equal.

He aroused at last when his landlord walked past, on his way to his fishing-boat, and, joining him, went out for a few hours' amusement.

The history of the week which followed may be briefly told, for particulars are not essential to our story, but, to Edgar Lewis, it was a period in his life he could never forget.

Having no other object in staying where he was, he found himself often going where his mind would at all times insist on dwelling, and in the society of Barbara he passed what he considered the happiest hours of his life.

Edgar Lewis, gay and unimpressible man of the world that he had been, learned the old, old lesson much as other men do, but to him the event seemed different from anything else the world had ever seen.

Gradually the humble coast vicinity grew to him the most pleasant and romantic spot on earth, and hour by hour he grew more in love with Barbara. For he knew his heart at length and did not try to disguise the fact; he was in love.

Such being the case, there was no wavering. He had no false pride, nor was he dishonorable, and, realizing the fact that the girl had come to be the brightest part of his life, he was only waiting until sure of her own feelings to ask her to become his wife.

For she was still a riddle to him. He knew that under her gravely intellectual conversation, and the gayety of lighter moments, two moods much seen in her, lay a heart which was warm, tender and true, and once that heart was his he would have no fear.

But there was something he could not understand. She had always been frank and friendly with him, but when he would have sounded her heart an iron barrier had seemed to arise to check him. Afterward, he would say it was his fancy, and resolve to press his suit, but the vague *something* was always there to stop the words.

Again, in her varied moods, she would often for a moment fall into one like that he had seen when by the canoe; a mood in which she would for the time speak cynically and bitterly, as though from some trouble of the past, and though it would quickly vanish, it could but leave an impression on him.

Thus, she still remained a riddle to him, in spite of the great affection he felt for her, and he had moments of restlessness when alone which were the only clouds on the sky of his happiness.

One evening they had been for a stroll along the beach. He had been telling of his experience in other lands, as he often did at her request, and then he broke a brief silence by asking if she had ever been in the interior of her own country.

"I was there once," she answered quietly.

"I intend to see that region before I leave Mexico. I have heard of the *haciendas* owned by the wealthy class there ever since I was a boy, and, somehow, the place has always possessed a romantic attraction for me."

"They are very fine."

"Were you there for any length of time?"

"Not so very long. We are poor people, you know, Señor Lewis, and I can not afford to be a traveler," she replied, archly.

"Señorita, isn't it about time we abandon the habit of addressing each other so formally? I had much rather you would call me Edgar."

She did not reply until they had taken several steps over the sand. He could not see her face, but the silence had begun to grow awkward when she said:

"If you wish, it shall be so, but I am not sure it would be wise."

"And why not?"

"The formal way seems more maidenly."

"Under some circumstances it would be more advisable, but friends should not be formal. Can't you trust me enough to drop ceremony?"

"I can, I am sure of that," she answered, earnestly. "I know the trust would not be misplaced, but still it might not be for the best. There! there! I am talking foolishly, am I not? Do not mind it, I beg of you. I often talk at random, don't I?"

She finished with a little, short laugh, which was gay enough, but, somehow it grated on Edgar's nerves.

"You are a creature of many moods," said he, quietly, "but you are always perfect in my sight."

"I don't think any one ever told me that before. You haven't found me out yet. Perfection is a rare article in this world. Have you noticed, Edgar, how lovely the glimmer of the moon on the water is to night?"

A minute before the American had been nearer a declaration than ever before, but her abrupt changing of the subject brought the old result and made him feel vexed.

"It don't shine where we are," he said, almost curtly.

She put her hand to her eyes with a quick motion which looked to him like an attempt to hide her face and a sudden remorse assailed him as he saw he had pained her, if signs went for anything; but, before he could speak again a step sounded on the pebbles and a tall man in the usual dress of the Mexicans came to their side.

He held his cloak well up to his chin, and his *sombrero* nearly hid his face, but Edgar judged he was no resident of the vicinity.

"Pardon, señor," said the stranger, courteously, "but can you direct me to the house of Diego Casper?"

"Half a mile south, near the coast," answered Edgar, politely, but impatient at the interruption.

"Thanks, señor. *Buenas noches!*"

With a graceful nod the unknown walked on, without once glancing back. Edgar watched him for a moment and then turned again to Barbara.

He was surprised and alarmed at what he saw. She stood in an unnatural attitude, her hand pressed over her heart, and even in the dim light he could see she was very pale.

"In Heaven's name, what is the matter?" he asked, quickly. "Are you ill, Barbara?"

She breathed heavily once or twice before she answered, and when she spoke her voice was husky.

"It is nothing," she said; "nothing but a slight pain here. I have felt it before."

Her hand was still over her heart and Edgar's alarm did not decrease.

"You are seriously ill," he said. "What can I do?"

"Nothing. Only be patient and I shall soon be myself again."

Half-unconsciously he placed his arm around her waist and drew her nearer to him. He did not know what to do or say, but gradually the color crept back to her cheeks and the trouble seemed passing away.

"I am better now," she said, withdrawing herself from his embrace. "There was nothing for you to be alarmed at and I beg you will forget it. I am well enough to walk to the house now."

There was no further sign of weakness and she even laughed at what she called her folly as they walked toward her home. They did not go fast, and at the door lingered for some time, but he had prudence enough not to detain her long and their good-nights were at last said.

As he turned away she kissed her hand to him with a light smile and then he stood alone outside the cabin.

CHAPTER V.

A BITTER BLOW.

EDGAR left the fisherman's cabin and walked homeward in deep thought, as was usual after leaving Barbara, but on this occasion his mind was less easy than usual. The illness of the girl had alarmed him greatly, and though she had seemed to recover so much, he could not but feel that such attacks meant something serious.

"She says she is subject to them, and, if so, they ought not to be disregarded. I must speak seriously to her about them, but I believe she does not regard them as lightly as she asserted. Her manner of saying good-night was more like that of a person bidding another farewell, and I think the smile at the end was forced. I will call early in the morning and inquire after her."

He reached his quarters and retired, but it was long before he slept. His mind was upon Barbara, the peerless, the strange, and it was not until he slept that her face faded from his view.

When he awoke the sun was shining into his room and he saw that it was past the hour at which he usually arose. Hastily arising, he at once dressed and went down to the eating-room.

The fisherman was already gone, but the table was still spread for him and he smilingly apologized for being so late.

"It is of no consequence, señor," answered the mistress of the house, "and the rest will do you good. I have a letter for you here, which Paulo, the boy you saw yesterday, brought at an early hour."

"A letter for me?" said Edgar, in surprise.

"Who in the world can have written to me?"

"A lady, I should judge, señor," was the arch reply.

Yes, it was a lady's superscription he saw upon the note, and he quickly broke the seal.

What he found there fell with crushing force and turned the sunshine of the day into darkness. This was what he read:

"SEÑOR LEWIS:—Before you have read these lines I shall be far away and gone forever from your sight. It may be you will feel sorry to have it so, and for my own part it will be bitter enough to have the pleasure of the past few days turned into what awaits me in the future. I do not go because I wish to, but because my fate drives me away. You told the truth, in part at least, when you said last night, 'The moon does not shine where we are.' Neither moon, nor sun, nor good luck smiles upon me. I am going and you will never see me again, but I beg that you will think of me with what kindness you can, and as an unfortunate rather than a guilty woman. If my sincere wishes can affect the future, it will be full of sunshine for you. Farewell, forever!"

"BARBARA."

All through this note Edgar Lewis read in silence, but on his face was a look of misery such as the good woman of the house had never before seen. She watched him in alarm, and when, at the end, the letter fell from his nerveless grasp, she dared not intrude on such grief.

"Where is the boy?" he asked, hoarsely.

"He was outside the cabin a minute ago."

Edgar picked up the fallen note and strode abruptly from the room. A little beyond the cabin, the boy, Paulo, lay drawing circles in the sandy soil, and he was soon by his side.

"Did you bring me a letter?" he tersely asked.

"Si, señor," answered Paulo.

"Who gave it to you?"

"Senorita Barbara, my master."

"When?"

"Last night, very late. I was going home from Sancho Alva's, and she stopped me by the picture rock."

"What did she say?"

"She only told me to leave it here at day-break, and then gave me a piece of gold."

"Where did she go then?"

"Home, I suppose, señor."

"And this is all you know?"

"Si, señor."

Again Edgar wheeled and strode abruptly away, but this time his course was toward Barbara's home, and his pace was rapid. His composure had returned, but in its place was a settled purpose. The girl might not yet be gone, and if she could be found he would have from her lips an explanation.

There was no anger in his heart. Too well he had read in the note the voice of a woman's sorrow, and what that sorrow was he determined to know. He could believe nothing evil of Barbara, and, if she was in trouble, he would go to her and once more become her champion. He would fight her battles, and if, at the end, he could name his reward, he would be happy indeed.

He was not in a mood to reason and had formed no theory when he strode up to old Pedro's door, and saw the fisherman and his wife sitting together in gloomy silence.

"Where is Barbara?" Edgar abruptly asked.

"*Quien sabe?*" answered Pedro, helplessly.

"Who knows?" repeated the American, sharply. "You ought to, that is certain. Is she not here?"

"No, señor."

"Where has she gone?"

"We do not know, señor."

"When did you last see her?"

"Last night, señor."

"And now she is gone?"

"Yes, señor."

"Did she leave no word?"

"Only a note, saying she was going."

"Pedro Lopez, what has driven her away?"

"*Quien sabe?*" repeated the man, gloomily.

"Who knows?" repeated Edgar, with increased sharpness. "You should know, if you do not. Are you not her father?"

"No, señor, I am not."

"What?" ejaculated the American.

"Not one drop of our blood flows in her veins."

"Then who, in Heaven's name is she?"

"*Quien sabe?* I cannot tell. I only know that she came to our cabin, three months ago, alone and a perfect stranger to us, and asked permission to stay with us and be our daughter. She gave us gold, and her charming ways won our love, so we were glad to have her here. She brightened our daily life, señor, and we were proud of her confidence and her favor. She called us her parents and we humored her

wishes, but during all this time she has never told us anything of herself more than that her name was Barbara. Where she came from and where she has gone we do not know."

"Not your daughter?" repeated Edgar. "Why was I not told of this?"

"She asked us to remain silent to all, and we never knew whether she told you or not."

"By my life! there is a dark mystery here. Pedro, will you let me see her note to you?"

The paper was handed to him, but it gave no clew. She merely said that circumstances were driving her away, and then she thanked them both for their kindness and spoke of her regret at leaving.

Edgar helplessly asked for their theory, which was soon given. They had always suspected that she had come to them from the interior, from the region of patricians and wealth, and they could only account for her being in exile, if such it were, on the ground that she had bitter enemies.

"If such is the case," said Pedro, "she probably learned that they were on her track and fled again."

The probability of the surmise struck Edgar with sudden conviction; like a flash he remembered the dark-faced stranger he and Barbara had met on the previous evening, and by the same course of reasoning her emotion on that occasion was explained.

"I see it all now!" muttered Lewis. "That man was her enemy, and it was the sight of him which agitated her so much and has driven her into exile again. Ay, she has fled from her peril—fled when I would have shed the last drop of my blood in her defense. And where has she gone? Heaven only knows, but I must, I will discover!"

"Right, señor, right," said Pedro, overhearing the last words. "Discover if you can, and I will aid you to punish her enemies."

Edgar did not hear the fisherman. He remembered that the stranger had asked for the cabin of Diego Casper and he might still be there. He must be found, and if Barbara could not be defended by common means, her persecutor should be stopped in his career even if a bullet was needed to do it.

Without a word of explanation, he turned and started for Casper's. The way was not long, and, finding the owner in, he was soon questioning him.

He was an honest fisherman, who had never been beyond his native shore, and he only knew that on the previous evening a stranger had called and asked for quarters. He had seemed like a *hidalgo* born and had scattered his gold profusely, so they had been glad to take him in; but when morning came he was gone and they had not seen him since.

A pair of gloves still remained in his room and the-e were brought to Edgar. At first they seemed to tell no tale, save that their richness of material indicated the wealth of the owner, but further examination showed the initials "A. P." worked upon them in silk, a clew which was better than nothing.

"Diego," said the American, earnestly, "I have reason to believe this man has run away. You are strong and experienced; if you will aid me to find him I will give you gold."

"I am ready, señor, at any time," was the prompt reply.

"Then come with me, and if the villain has not covered too much ground we will hunt him down!"

CHAPTER VI.

AN ADVENTURE.

WE need not waste words in telling of the search made by Edgar and the men he called to his aid; a search which was as fruitless as though every man had sat tamely indoors, for not a trace was found of either Barbara or the dark stranger.

Where they had gone and how, no one could tell; they had vanished, phantom-like, and there were some of the settlers who spoke among themselves in a way they did not care to practice when with Edgar. To them, it looked quite likely that the mysterious girl had been murdered and flung in the water, after which the stranger—and some there were who thought he might be the Evil One, in person—could easily have gone in a boat or on horseback.

Edgar Lewis kept up the search for a week, at the end of which time he felt sure that Barbara was not within twenty miles of her temporary home.

When he finally paid off the men, who had

filled their pockets in his employ, he did not, however, abandon what had become to him a ruling passion. With his great love for Barbara, he resolved to seek for her still, and when, one day, he left the coast, it was with a settled purpose.

Her old home, he felt sure, had been among the haciendas of the interior, and there he would go and look for her and, also, for the man whose initials were A. P.

If Barbara lived, she must be found.

Before beginning his search, he bethought himself of an old friend, an American, and a short interview with Harold Dare was enough to enlist him in the enterprise. He was a light-hearted but brave fellow, and a trip through the country would please him as much as it would to humor Edgar's foible.

For he could not look upon the undertaking as anything else. The chances of finding the girl were so very few that only love or hate could have suggested the move, and he thought of the old expression concerning a needle in a haystack.

They started on the journey well-clad, well-armed and well supplied with money, and, stopping at each village as they went, made a canvass of the vicinity before moving on again.

The events of the first fortnight were tame enough, but the spirits of Edgar had gradually returned, except for periods of melancholy, and Harold's continual good-humor was contagious.

Just at dark, one evening, they rode into a small village and sought lodging at the meson, or inn, where they soon found they could get a good bed, a passable supper and some of the worst *aguardiente* they had ever tasted.

All this was as usual, and they made their evening meal without a suspicion that they were about entering into a series of remarkable events.

After supper, they sought the public room and sat down to sip *aguardiente* and watch the loungers. Only a few were in the room. A burly Mexican was behind the bar, and at the various tables little groups of men talked among themselves and curiously eyed the Americans from under their broad *sombreros*.

Some of them were cavaliers, gayly dressed, others peons, while still another class was composed of rough-and-ready fellows who are commonly supposed to be always ready to cut a man's throat for a trifling recompense.

In one corner, almost in the rear of Edgar's chair, a solitary man lay huddled up in an uncomfortable position, sleeping. Little could be seen of him, except that his hair and beard were long and shaggy, but his rags bespoke him one of the beggars whose paradise the traveler would think, if numbers be any criterion, is in Mexico; and they gave him only a passing glance.

At the end of half an hour, however, this man of rags stirred into life, and, arising, came forward and drew a chair to the Americans' table, sitting down between them.

Hat, hair and beard hid most of his face, and the remainder was masked by dirt, but his manner was not at all timid as he glanced from one to the other. That glance made Harold groan inwardly, for he had seen Mexican beggars before, but Edgar eyed him graciously, for he knew such vagabonds were always a walking directory of their town.

"Do you speak Spanish, señor?" the fellow asked, addressing Edgar.

"I do," was the kind reply.

"Yet you are Americans?"

"Yes."

"Shall you write a book on this country on your return?"

The question was a remarkable one for a beggar, and Lewis had to smile as he replied he was not sure he should ever return.

"If you do so, and then write a book, I wish, señor, that you would mention that you have seen me here."

"I shall be pleased to oblige you. What is your name, señor?"

"I am the Wandering Jew."

The assertion was made in a melancholy tone, while the words were such as to cause Edgar to look more keenly at the vagabond. That glance, coupled with what had gone before, was enough to reveal one fact—the man was mentally deranged. His eyes were dull and vacant, his whole expression gloomy and sad, and the American began to pity him.

"I am not sure I understand you, señor," he said.

"Have you never heard of the Wandering

Jew, made famous by Eugene Sue, the great writer?"

"Certainly."

"Well, señor, I am he. You know, however, that Sue wrote only a novel, and that my existence dates far back of his day—to the very beginning of the Christian era. For my crimes I was then doomed to wander unceasingly and the end is not yet."

"I have heard of this before, but I supposed it only a legend."

"It is too true, señor. Oh! what a wretched lot is mine! You can not imagine all I have suffered:

"You have my sympathy," said Edgar, gently.

"Repentance avails nothing in my case; the curse is upon me and my feet have pressed the soil of every land. I have seen nations rise and fall, and I was on this continent many times before Columbus discovered it in 1492."

"Did you ever see that explorer?"

"Many times, señor, and there have been few great men known to history whom I have not met."

In this manner the madman wandered on for some time. He was evidently pleased at finding such attentive listeners, and as they had no better business to occupy their time they let him say all he wished. He seemed harmless, and, at times, his fancies were amusing.

While listening, they attentively watched people who came and went. Some merely dropped in for a drink of *aguardiente* and went their way, while others sat down and tarried for awhile.

Anon, a group of men at a table near them suddenly changed their conversation to a lower tone, and, observing them, the Americans saw that they were looking at a man who was carelessly leaning against the bar and sipping his liquor, and the manner of the men indicated that he was a person of some consequence.

In appearance he was much like his companions, except that his larger frame gave him an impressive air. Typical Mexican boots, leggings, *serape* and *sombrero* were visible, but the slouched hat hid so much of his face that Edgar could only see that he was still young in years while the keen eyes indicated a bold and daring spirit.

He had leisurely surveyed all the occupants of the room, but without addressing any, and when he had paid the *mesonero* quietly departed.

"*Amigo mio*," said one of the loungers, as the man disappeared, "did you know that customer?"

"Not I, Domingo," replied the innkeeper.

"Unless I am blind," said Domingo, "he was none other than El Alacran."

"El Alacran?" cried the *mesonero*.

"Even so."

"It cannot be."

"And why not?"

"St. Catherine! it cannot be. El Alacran in my *meson*!" ejaculated the host.

"We all think so," assured Domingo. "Of course, we do not know the fellow, but we have seen him near the chaparral when he politely asked for our purses, and, unless my eyes deceive me, it was he."

"I saw him no less than a week ago," said another man. "I had been to San Pedro and was returning by way of the chaparral when the robbers rode out and intercepted me with El Alacran and the Lady Jaguar at their head. Of course I gave up my *oro* and departed promptly, but I looked well at the outlaw chief and I think this man was he."

"May the saints defend me!" muttered the host.

"Who is this El Alacran?" Edgar asked, of the Wandering Jew.

"Caramba! I know not. I never heard of him before," replied the madman.

"It is easily told," responded a man, who had overheard the question. "El Alacran is the leader of a band of robbers who have their quarters in the Black Chaparral, and the authorities have not been able to capture them."

"And who is Lady Jaguar?"

"The queen of the band—the wife, it is supposed of El Alacran. She rides a spotted mustang, which is like a jaguar in color, hence, the name."

"And do you think this was El Alacran?"

"*Quien sabe?* I do, however, suspect that the innkeeper is not so ignorant as he pretends. His holy horror seems to me to have been exaggerated."

CHAPTER VII.

THE BLACK CHAPARRAL.

THE Americans did not feel particularly interested in El Alacran, and, as the Mexicans seemed to look upon the event in a very matter-of-fact light, the conversation was soon changed.

Having found a communicative lounge, Edgar questioned him regarding the town and its people while Harold listened to the rambling talk of the Wandering Jew.

Nothing further of importance transpired, and when the people began to depart for their homes, Edgar and Harold sought their room while the madman returned to his niche in the corner.

With the short-sightedness of mortals, the two friends believed the day had brought them nothing of interest, but they remembered that, as their way lay toward San Pedro on the following morning, they would be obliged to pass through the chaparral where El Alacran had his lair.

"I wouldn't care to meet the man," said Harold, frankly, "but I wouldn't mind to peep at Lady Jaguar, as they call her."

"Take care, my boy; she is a wife!"

"I'm not so sure of that. One of the crowd below told me he once heard her address El Alacran as 'brother,' and he says she is bewilderingly handsome, though a mask hides the upper part of her face."

"All I ask is that she and her pardner will let me alone. I don't care to lose my cash."

"That reminds me that the Wandering Jew did not once ask for alms. He is rather a remarkable man of rags."

"I believe he is, or, rather, was once. My language is no better than his, and I learned Spanish of a good teacher in Madrid."

"Perhaps he is a *hidalgo* gone mad. We'll ask to-morrow."

"I inquired of the *mesonero*, and he told me nothing was known of the madman except that he had been hanging around the village at times for a week past. He never asks for money, but pays cash for his cheap living."

"A good kind of a man of rags, as I said before."

In such conversation an hour was passed, and then, their pipes being empty, the two retired to pass a night of peaceful sleep.

The following morning they prepared to depart after breakfast. No more was seen of the man supposed to be El Alacran, the Wandering Jew had gone his way, and there was nothing of interest about the place.

They mounted their horses and rode away at an easy pace, such as would take them to the village of San Pedro a little before noon.

Half of their course lay among *haciendas*, which were fine for the country and interested them somewhat, but, later, they neared Black Chaparral, and the danger which had seemed so light on the previous night began to assume more tangible form.

They were well armed in every way, but they had no desire to meet El Alacran. In the first place, the people had not forgotten the war of eight years before with the United States, and a strong dislike for their race lurked under the suave manners of the people, making them averse to the shedding of even outlaw blood; and, secondly, they had no desire to risk their lives in an encounter with the robbers.

Almost unconsciously they quickened their pace as they entered the chaparral. The route was narrow and none too easy, and the density of the wood made even day gloomy and duskish.

About a mile of the way had been traveled when the young men simultaneously pulled up their horses and stared suspiciously at what they saw before them, a course not at all to be wondered at under such circumstances.

Just ahead, and completely barring the way, a dozen horsemen sat with their faces turned toward the Americans, carbines in their hands, *cuchillos* in their belts, and on their persons garbs which were by far too gaudy and wild for honest plebeians or proud cavaliers.

Add to this the fact that each man had his carbine at his shoulder, its muzzle covering the two friends, and the seriousness of the situation may be realized.

Only a moment did Edgar Lewis pause, and then, at the touch of his hand, his horse wheeled, preparatory to flight; but, to Edgar's dismay, he saw another line of grim fellows in precisely the same attitude as the first.

They were between two fires!

The Americans paused in irresolution, but one of the second party at once rode forward a horse's length, showing a disposition to speak. He was a man of powerful frame, with a clean-shaven face which was full of power and firmness, and his richness of attire at once bespoke him the chief of the outlaws.

El Alacran it doubtless was, but the Americans were not prepared to say he was the same man they had seen at the *meson*.

"You did not expect this surprise, señors?" the stranger said, in a tone almost polite.

"Was it intended for us?" Edgar asked, as coolly as possible.

"It certainly was."

"And why?"

"Because you owe toll to El Alacran, the king of this chaparral. I am he."

"But why do you stop us thus?"

"Because I want your money; that is all. El Alacran is not an assassin and no man need fear bodily harm if he is sensible. You heard me described last night at the *meson*, and you know pretty well what I am. Now, what I want is your money. Hand that over and you can go free."

"Then you are really El Alacran?"

"I am."

"Well, captain, to be frank, I hate confidently to part with my money."

"I don't doubt it."

"Can't we compromise the matter?"

"How?" was the terse inquiry.

"I put myself against any of your band at shooting, sword-playing, or—"

"Nonsense! I am not a theoretical robber, I mean business. I want your money and that alone."

Edgar looked at the grim line on both sides of him. To the right and left was the chaparral, equally hard to break through as the living impediments. There was no escape for them.

"What shall we do?" he helplessly asked.

"We can't run, and to fight twenty-five men would be a little foolish," said Harold.

"I'm afraid we've got to disburse."

"It looks very much like it."

"Come," cried El Alacran, impatiently, "what are you going to do?"

"How heavy do you propose to strike us? You say you want our money. Do you propose to rob us of our horses?"

"To let you keep them would be against our rules, but on this occasion I will be merciful. Keep your animals, but the money—"

He paused and seemed looking at something beyond them; then touched his horse and rode past. They looked in the direction he had taken, and then a subdued exclamation fell from Harold's lips.

"Lady Jaguar!" he muttered.

Both men saw, just in the rear of the first line of robbers, a female, and it needed but one glance to tell them she was the noted outlaw queen.

They saw a woman of superb form, somewhat gaudily but tastefully clad, with long black hair floating over her shoulders—a fine picture under more favorable circumstances, though the mask covered her face from view, and they forgot all else temporarily in looking at her.

Her horse was a mustang of unusual beauty. Clean of limb was he and finely formed, while his spotted skin gave him the appearance which had gained for his mistress the sobriquet of "Lady Jaguar."

The female outlaw was before them!

El Alacran rode forward and the men parted for him to reach the side of Lady Jaguar.

"What the dickens is in the wind now?" asked Harold. "I'm afraid the charming outlaw has taken a fancy to my horse and wants to scoop him in. Fine looking female, isn't she, my boy?"

"She would make a fine appearance drawing a knife across your throat," suggested Edgar dryly.

"She could do it, too, without a blink. It is a characteristic of her race."

In spite of their light remarks, neither of the Americans was ignorant of the seriousness of their situation. They were among men who would not hesitate to shoot them for a handful of gold, and perhaps Lady Jaguar was telling the chief that it would not be safe to let them go free.

The two were conversing in a subdued tone, but there was nothing in their manner to indicate that they were speaking of the Americans. The woman seemed to do most of the

talking, while the manner of El Alacran was courteous and attentive.

At the end of perhaps ten minutes he turned away from her and rode back to our friends.

"Why are you in Mexico?" he abruptly asked.

"I merely came to see the country," Edgar answered.

"Well, I have decided that, as foreigners, you are entitled to some respect at my hands. I want to show you there is chivalry even among robbers in this country. You may go free, money and all, but I advise you to get out of Mexico as soon as convenient. The next time you find a carbine leveled at your head you may fare worse. *Buenos días, señors!*"

CHAPTER VIII.

IN SAN PEDRO.

EL ALACRAN waved his hand, pointed to the south, and the upper detachment of outlaws silently rode past the Americans and joined the lower half. The two friends looked sharply at Lady Jaguar as she passed, but she was on the further side of her bravos, who obstructed the view, and her mask prevented them from learning anything new.

Without once glancing toward them, she rode to the head of the band, which then started down the road, and in a few moments the last of the party had disappeared, leaving the Americans alone on the ground.

Harold sounded a surprised whistle, but Edgar promptly turned his horse's head toward San Pedro.

"Let us clear out before they change their minds," he said; and they started at a trot.

"Well, this is a genuine adventure," declared Harold.

"I don't know that I feel like grumbling, since all my money is in my pockets," answered his friend.

"And thereby hangs a mystery. To what good fortune do we owe our unexpected deliverance?"

"To some whim, probably."

"Whose whim?"

"You have me there."

"If it was El Alacran's, it was a mighty sudden one. Five minutes before he was waving the bloody tomahawk, as it were, above our heads, and then, all of a sudden, the scene changed. Why was this?"

"What is your idea?"

"I have a vague idea that Lady Jaguar was at the bottom of it. Perhaps she signaled to him when we were not looking and then advised him to let up."

"What could have been her motive?"

"Women are queer 'critters,' especially Mexican women, and it may be the heroic mold of one of us impressed her gentle soul."

"Possible, but not probable. Be that as it may, we have seen El Alacran and Lady Jaguar, and we can't complain at their usage of us."

Conversing busily, they rode on through the chaparral at a more rapid pace than formerly. They had no desire to encounter more banditti, and when they emerged from the wood and saw cultivated fields beyond they were not sorry.

An hour later they reached the village of San Pedro. There was nothing about the place to distinguish it from the towns they had seen before, unless it was in the shape of a relic of former grandeur and the late war which stood at one side of the dwellings.

This relic was what had once been a fort, but the cannon of the invaders had battered down its walls, leaving the building a ruin, and no attempt had since been made to repair or occupy it. Alone and gloomy, it stood deserted by man, and when the inhabitants saw it they doubtless cursed the Americans with the fervor of their race.

Edgar and Harold saw the ruin as they rode into the village, but, knowing nothing of its history, gave it only a passing glance and went on to the only *meson*, a respectable place kept by one Felipe Diaz, who gladly gave the travelers quarters.

Their arrival excited few comments and dinner was serenely eaten. Afterward they went into the public room, as was their custom, but it was the hot hour of the day when a Mexican village is as quiet and, seemingly, as deserted as a graveyard; so they found only one man besides the host to keep them company.

The solitary lounge was of a class common in this tropical land—a man of mixed Mexican

and Indian blood—but there was that in his face which showed him to be possessed of unusual intelligence, shrewdness and strength of character.

Edgar rather liked his looks, and when he asked him to the bar to taste of *aguardiente*, the stoical fellow was at once transformed into a polite and admiring *companero*.

That they had struck a mine of communication was soon shown. The half-blood went on to give his history and name his accomplishments in a steady flow of words, and the sequel proved his motive. His name was Roldan, he said, and he was by calling a horse-catcher, bull-fighter, hunter, guide and numberless other things.

According to his account, there was not a better shot, lasso-thrower, horse-tamer or guide in the country, and, knowing every foot of country for fifty miles around, he would be pleased to put himself at the service of *los Americanos* while they remained in that vicinity. There was much of interest to see, the ruined fort, the chaparrals, the grand farms, and all these could be seen by engaging him.

Our friends did not want a guide, and they said so, but Roldan only warmed to his work.

"*Caramba!*" he said, "you must not go away until you have seen the ruined fort by moonlight. There are ghosts, there, señors, genuine ghosts, and you will be pleased to see them. Inside the fort, too, you can see cannon-balls fired when your countrymen invaded our land and destroyed the walls of the garrison. Ah! it was once a grand place, built some forty years ago, when I was a babe, but its beauty is forever gone."

Edgar and his friend were not particularly interested in the fort nor did they believe in ghosts, but the idea of a ramble about the town by night struck them favorably and Roldan was consequently engaged.

This done, Edgar asked the usual questions in regard to the inhabitants of San Pedro but without gaining any clew. He had almost given up the hope of doing so. From the time when Barbara disappeared from the fisherman's cabin she had completely vanished, and the fear was growing that she had been murdered and thrown in the ocean.

His interest had not in any degree abated. His was not a fickle nature and he could never forget the fair girl who had been like sunshine to him for that halcyon period. He pictured her, if living, exposed to dreadful peril and, with the will but inability to aid her, he was often miserable in spite of Harold's contagious gayety.

So far, he had not found the man whom he believed to be the "A. P." who had left the gloves at the coast man's cabin. Probably he might meet that man face to face and not know him, so brief and indistinct had been the view, but he had a general idea of his looks and every one who bore the fateful initials had been investigated during the search.

When darkness fell over San Pedro, the young men and Roldan donned their outer garments and left the *meson*. They were well armed with revolvers and knives, after the fashion of the country, though there seemed little fear as long as Roldan was a member of the company.

For some time their experience was not worth recording, for they wandered in the main streets where the fierce-eyed men and bright-eyed señoritas strolled about after the manner of their race; but, as the pedestrians began to fall off, the half-breed led his employers toward the ruined fort.

They had given the place little thought. In the first place they did not believe in ghosts, and, secondly, they thought the tales he had told of phantom visitors were merely of his own concocting; but when they stood under the broken walls he crossed himself fervently and muttered some unintelligible words.

"Are you brave, señors?" he asked.

"Tolerably so," answered Edgar, looking with some curiosity at the ruins.

The night was neither light nor dark, though each element had its turn when the moon shone clearly or was obscured by a dark cloud, and as the flickering light touched the broken pile it did have a look a trifle ghost-like.

"We will ascend to the top by this breach," said Roldan. "Inside, there are passages where one may move about, but the way is not pleasant at night and the bats might flap in your faces."

Holding fast to the scattered blocks, the adventurers were soon at the top of the ruins

where, as the moon came out brightly, they had a good view of the surrounding country.

The Americans looked with interest at the noble haciendas in the distance, but Roldan's gaze was for the most part fixed upon the ruins and he crossed himself frequently. If he did not believe in the ghosts of the ruin, he was acting his part well.

Perhaps fifteen minutes had been passed in this way when Edgar pointed to a hacienda just outside the village and asked the name of its owner. It was a fine estate, with broad fields and an imposing house, or *casa*, and it struck him he would like to see the place.

"It is the home of Don Manuel Villena," replied Roldan. "He is very rich and the family is of good Castilian blood. His cousin, Don Leon, from whom he inherited the hacienda, was a noble man, but he conspired against the Government and ruined himself. He was for some time confined as a prisoner in this very fort, which was then strong and occupied, but he escaped and has never since been seen. Probably he died years ago."

"Can we look over the hacienda?" asked Edgar.

"I do not know. Don Manuel is not a very hospitable man and I fear he would not be glad to receive you."

"But can't we go now and see the *casa* and grounds by moonlight? The place looks interesting from here."

"We can try," answered the half-breed, after a pause, "but Don Manuel would be angry if he knew of it."

"We won't let him know."

Somehow a sudden whim to visit the Villena estate had seized Edgar; why he could not tell, and the fact that Roldan opposed him only added to his desire. He must go at all hazards.

CHAPTER IX.

THE FACE AT THE WINDOW.

THE half-breed did not make further opposition—perhaps he preferred the hacienda to the haunted fort—and they descended from the ruins and moved toward the *casa*.

"Does El Alacran ever come as far as here?" asked Harold.

"Once or twice he and his wild band have ridden through the very heart of the town, but his deeds are mostly done in the chaparral."

"Why don't your people hunt him down?"

"Caramba! why don't we tame the wind? The thing has been tried, señor, but El Alacran laughs at his enemies, and in the depths of the wood, can never be found."

"Have you ever seen Lady Jaguar?"

"Only at a distance, but they say she is the most merciless of the band."

The Americans did not think it necessary to dispute his statement, and, as they had entered the Villena grounds, the conversation was dropped.

They had no trouble in gaining the vicinity of the house itself, and, once there, they made a circuit and surveyed it from each point. It was like all Mexican dwellings of its class, only finer built than the majority, and they could have named no object in their examination more than to observe its architecture.

The listlessness of their manner was destined to be dispelled, however, for Harold suddenly grasped Edgar's arm and pointed to the wall nearest them.

"Look!" he said.

"What is it?"

"A woman at the window, as I live!"

"So there is, but why get excited? It is probably some peon girl watching for her lover."

"More likely a patrician, young and fair, at sight of whom our hearts would go out in homage."

"Nonsense!"

"It may be so but I wish the moon would come out and give us a square look."

"I think it is the Senorita Luisa," said Roldan.

"And who is she?"

"The niece of Don Manuel!"

"Good! Now, Edgar, here is my chance to advance my feeble fortunes. If I can captivate the *haciendero's* daughter, my fortune is made. How shall I do it? If I had a fiddle, I'd play a love tune after the orthodox style of serenades, but I lack the fiddle. Can you sing? My voice is like a Chinese drum and won't work."

"The best thing you can do is to let the

senorita alone. Possibly, she might be willing to indulge in a flirtation, but Don Manuel would object, and, if she has a lover, he would gladly carve you with his *euchillo*.

"I think she sees us; she is looking this way."

As he spoke the moon, which had been wading in clouds, suddenly burst forth into view, flooding its light upon the *casa* and giving them a distinct view of the lady at the window.

Harold improved the opportunity, and, for a moment, he was stricken dumb by the vision of loveliness before him. His previous talk had been mere nonsense, but he grew serious as he looked upon what he mentally pronounced the handsomest woman he had ever seen.

It was really a wonderfully handsome face he saw at the window. Bright, dark, well-rounded, intelligent and lovely, with great, dusky eyes and a profusion of black, rippling hair—this was the lady he beheld, and even his volatile nature was deeply impressed.

He turned soberly to Edgar but his words died on his lips at sight of his friend. The latter was standing like one dumfounded and the expression on his face startled Harold. He was looking straight at the lady and his soul was pictured on his features.

Then the two men saw him suddenly stretch forth his arms toward the window, while a name fell from his lips.

"Barbara!" he cried, and there was passion, tenderness and entreaty in his voice.

The lady seemed to start but did not answer. The court, narrow at that point, separated them, but she must have heard his cry.

"Barbara, I am here!" he eagerly added.

Roldan touched the arm of Harold.

"He is mad or mistaken," he whispered. "That is Donna Luisa, the niece of Senor Villena."

At the second call the lady moved and put out one hand.

"And who are you, señor?" she asked, and the voice was the same the American had heard on the coast in the old, happy days.

"Don't you know me, Barbara? I am Edgar, Edgar Lewis. I have looked for you long and earnestly, and, thank Heaven, I have found you at last!"

"I do not know you," said she, in seeming perplexity.

"Not know me? Surely you have not forgotten Edgar, Barbara, or the happy days at the cabin on the coast?"

"I think there is some mistake. My name is not Barbara, but Luisa, and I am the niece of Don Manuel Villena. If I have ever seen you before, I am glad to acknowledge as my friend so gallant a cavalier, and, if you wish, I will meet you outside the *casa*, to-morrow night."

Edgar Lewis looked the image of dismay. After all his searching he had found the woman he loved only to be disowned, but he suddenly remembered that she was always a creature of mystery and all the firmness of his strong will came to his aid.

Roldan suddenly plucked at his sleeve.

"Agree to her proposal, señor," he hurriedly advised. "It is not safe for you to talk here. Don Manuel might overhear you, and, besides, the lady's suitor, Alberto Pareja, is inside the house."

"Do you fear I will fail to keep my word?" the lady continued. "A Villena never tells a falsehood and I will meet you as I say."

There was anxiety in her voice and it suddenly occurred to Edgar that she might have an object in this strange course, so he hastened to reply:

"I do not doubt you, and I agree to what you say. I will come at this hour to-morrow evening, and I hope all will then be well."

"All will be well, señor; do not doubt it," she answered. "Return at once to your dwelling, Don Edgar, and let no one know you have seen Luisa Villena. *Adios, amigo mio, adios!*"

She smiled in the old, bright way, waved a graceful farewell and retreated from the window, leaving the trio alone and in perplexity.

"Let us *vamos*," said the half-breed, quickly. "It would go hard with us if we were found prowling around here, and we can do no good by staying."

"You are right," assented Edgar; "we will go."

They suited the action to the word and Roldan led the way so rapidly for a time that no chance was given for conversation.

Edgar was busy with his thoughts, and

never before had he been more perplexed. He had at last found Barbara, but she had refused to acknowledge his acquaintance, and therein lay another mystery.

What was her object? Had she feigned ignorance because of people inside the *casa*, or because of Edgar's companions, or had she only been playing with him when on the coast?

"Who did you say she was?" he suddenly and confusedly asked of Roldan.

"It was Senorita Luisa, the niece of Don Manuel Villena," was the explicit reply.

"You are sure?"

"Certainly, señor. I've known her ever since she was a child."

"Are her parents dead?"

"Yes, señor. It was her father of whom I told you when at the ruined fort. Don Leon was a noble man, but he was seized for treason and confined in the fort. He escaped, mysteriously, but was never seen again, so far as I know, but many think he was killed in the pursuit which followed. I was a young man then, less than thirty, but I remember all very clearly. Don Leon left a wife and daughter, but the former died of a broken heart and the little Luisa became the ward of Don Manuel. That was ten years ago and she has grown to be a woman and the same you saw, to-night."

"Has she always been at the hacienda?"

"No, señor. She has traveled more or less, quite frequently."

"If this estate was once her father's, isn't it now hers?"

"It is, by right, but Don Manuel has managed all. Rumor says he tried to have the whole property awarded to him, but he was only made a guardian, and when Luisa marries all goes to her. Another rumor is that the property was seized as that of a traitor, when Don Leon died, and given to Manuel, but that he is to give the senorita half the estate when she marries. You seem interested, señor. Then I will tell you a third rumor. Don Leon once had a younger brother, but he quarreled with their father and ran away when a youth. The third rumor says if he returns before the marriage of Luisa, all will be his, otherwise Don Manuel becomes sole possessor."

"Isn't there any more?" demanded Harold, bewildered at such a variety of reports.

"Not that I know of," answered Roldan, seriously.

But Edgar had already heard enough to interest him. Whichever one of the rumors was true, there was plain evidence to show why Don Manuel, if so disposed, should persecute his niece, all of which was in keeping with the theory he had long before formed in regard to Barbara.

CHAPTER X.

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS.

By this time the trio had reached the ruins of the old fort, and Edgar paused and looked with fresh interest at the battered walls. There, ten years before, when Don Leon Villena had been a prisoner of state, had begun the romance, or tragedy, which had made him acquainted with Barbara, and he resolved to trace every thread of the web of mystery.

"Were you personally acquainted with Don Leon?" he asked, turning to Roldan.

"Yes, señor."

"How did he make his escape?"

The face of the half-breed remained as calm as the bare stones before them.

"No man knows, señor. Yonder hole was once the window of his room. Somehow, he wrenched away the bars and escaped."

"Didn't he have help from the outside?"

"*Quien sabe?* The officers could never tell, and, who would aid a conspirator?"

"Why not his fellow-conspirators?"

"Caramba! I do not think he was a traitor. It is believed he was innocent."

"Then he had enemies who made him seem guilty. Am I right?"

"I do not know, señor."

"Do you know of any friend who would have assisted him?"

"He had friends, many of them, but no one knows who aided him."

Edgar was not asking questions without an object. In some way he was anxious to find who had given this assistance, but Roldan seemed wholly ignorant and he let the topic rest.

"How has Donna Luisa been treated by her uncle?" he abruptly asked.

During the foregoing conversation Harold had been an attentive listener, and he could not but think that Roldan chafed under so close a questioning; but he was a hired man, the Americans were rich, and he was anxious to keep his situation.

"I do not know that she has ever complained. So far as I know, Don Manuel has been kind," he replied to the last inquiry.

"You spoke of a lover—what is his name?"

"Alberto Pareja."

"Who is—"

"Edgar stopped short and stood staring at the half-blood like one gone mad. The name had not impressed him particularly at first, but, as he suddenly thought of its initials, a wild hope seized him and stopped his utterance.

Had he at last found the "A. P." of the coast episode?"

"Who is he?" he quickly continued.

"An old friend of Don Manuel, and a man of about my years. I've known him all my life. Rumor says he is to marry Donna Luisa."

"Roldan, I must see this man."

"That is easily done. He often comes to your meson for a glass of *aguardiente*."

"And, Roldan, I want to engage you for an indefinite period, how long I cannot tell. If you are faithful, you shall be well paid."

"You can depend on me, señor."

"Enough. Now let us go to our quarters, and in the morning come to me at an early hour."

"Roldan promised, and in a short time he had bade them good-night at the door of their inn, and they were alone in their chamber.

Hours passed before they retired, but every minute was filled with conversation which was very earnest, but in only the slightest degree calculated to explain the fresh mysteries which beset Edgar.

In the first place, why had Barbara declined to recognize him? The idea that she had been playing with him, and had broken off the idyl, was soon abandoned; he trusted her more than that. But what could be her reason? He could think of no other explanation than that she feared to trust his companions; but why had she let them know that she was to meet him on the following evening?

As for the mystery of her life, he believed he had pretty clearly solved it. Don Manuel was really her enemy and persecutor, and, in order to gain her fortune, was trying to marry her to Alberto Pareja, who was doubtless a willing tool.

Barbara had fled from this persecution only to be followed and recaptured by Pareja, and she was then held in their power, all her hope and power of resistance doubtless gone.

This theory gave rise to another question. If, when they were at the coast, she cared for him, why had she always baffled his attempts to arrive at an understanding, and why had she fled at the approach of her enemy instead of coming to him for protection?

"She is a woman," said Harold, as though that settled the whole matter. "You say she was always eccentric, and it isn't to be expected she would do things as other people do. It isn't the way of eccentric people."

There was no disputing this logic, but Edgar did not feel exactly satisfied. There was a mystery somewhere which he did not understand.

They went to bed at last, and, exhausted as they were, slept soundly.

In the morning when they descended to the lower room they found Roldan already awaiting them. He said he had learned that Alberto Pareja was away from the town, so there was no use of looking for him; and they improved the cooler hours of the forenoon by looking about San Pedro, where Edgar gained all possible information, but as the day grew hot they retired, Mexican fashion, to their apartments and gained necessary sleep.

Edgar had decided to go alone to keep his appointment with Barbara. Harold vainly demurred, for he feared trouble might occur, but secretly agreed with Roldan that they should be near enough to the *casa* to render aid if any was needed.

At twilight Edgar went out on his venture. He was clad as a Mexican cavalier and no weapons were visible, but really a pair of revolvers and a bowie-knife were under his *serape*.

No particular spot had been designated for the interview, and, as he was early when he arrived near the *casa*, he took his station in a group of trees and proceeded to watch.

The dwelling was dark and quiet, but a lithe peon occasionally passed his cover, and he had no desire to venture out until those unreliable fellows had become still.

It was not as light as on the preceding night. A continuous covering of clouds was over the sky, but this suited his purpose, and he only feared that Barbara would not be able to keep the appointment.

An hour passed and he was just thinking of leaving his cover when the sight of a female figure coming from the direction of the *casa* awakened him to new life.

He could hardly believe he had so easily found Barbara, and feared it was only a peon girl, but as she came nearer, the doubt vanished and he knew he saw Donna Luisa.

She was moving slowly and would have passed to the right of his cover, but he stepped forth and approached her with a quick step.

She saw him and paused, while he advanced with outstretched hands.

"My darling!" he exclaimed, "I feared you would not come."

His arms were open as though to embrace her, but she merely put her hands in his.

"A Villena never fails," she quietly said.

"But is this the way in which you greet me?"

"How should I greet you? Could you respect a maiden who was less distant at a second interview with a stranger?"

"Do you call me a stranger?" he passionately asked.

"I never saw you until last night!"

"Barbara, in heaven's name, cease this mockery. Do you know you are tearing my heart in pieces? Do you know I have searched for you all these long and weary days since you fled from the cabin of Pedro Lopez? Oh! do not trifle with me now, Barbara!"

She put her hand to her head as though bewildered.

"Who is Pedro Lopez, and why do you call me Barbara?" she asked. "That is not my name. I am Luisa Villena, and I never heard of Pedro Lopez or saw you until last night. I should be glad of your acquaintance, Don Edgar, but you are mistaken in regard to my identity."

Bewildered and dumfounded, Edgar Lewis stared straight at the lady before him. Was he the victim of a mistake? Was this girl really another than Barbara and only her double?

The form was hers, and so was the face, with its regular features, fine proportion, dark beauty, dusky eyes and border of rippling hair. It was Barbara, but why—

"What is that chain you wear on your neck?" he suddenly demanded.

"It was my mother's," she gravely answered.

"Ay, and you wore it on your neck when at the cabin of Pedro Lopez. It is the same chain. Are there not two pictures inside, your father's and your mother's?"

"Yes, Don Edgar."

"And yet you claim that you are not Barbara. What, in Heaven's name, is your object?"

The girl put her hand to her head in a bewildered way.

"I can't understand," she pitifully said. "I don't know you, I never saw you before, and yet it seems as though I ought to remember, for your sake. Tell me, Don Edgar, who and what am I?"

CHAPTER XI.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

THE words and the actions of the girl struck Edgar Lewis with crushing force. Her want of memory, her vague and confused manner, her peculiar talk—all tended to create one opinion; and the American almost staggered at the belief assailed him that Barbara was insane.

And then, on the heels of the idea, came a new theory. She had been insane before he saw her at the coast, she had fled from those who would have been her friends, she had been pursued by these friends, instead of by enemies, and conveyed back to her home.

He remembered her peculiar moods when at Pedro Lopez's cabin, her occasional bitterness and excessive gayety, her— But, no, no; it could not be. He remembered her in her confiding, her womanly moods, and he could have sworn she was not then mad. If she had become so, it was through the fiendish work of Manuel Villena and his confederates.

Leading her to the grove, he gave her a seat under a tree and went methodically at work to dispel the clouds, to make her remember him and the coast episode.

She listened like a child, at first, but without any signs of returning memory, and then her mood changed. She became calm and natural, and in a clear, forceful manner tried to persuade him he had made a mistake.

"I am not Barbara," she said, positively, but quietly. "You are in error, Don Edgar, but I can see that you are a true gentleman, and, while you remain at San Pedro, I shall be glad to call you my friend. I would ask permission to receive you at the hacienda, but my uncle does not like Americans."

Edgar did not reply. He was filled with despair and knew not what to do. He had exhausted all his eloquence and argument, and now he did not know how to deal with a mad girl.

Donna Luisa saw the sternness of his face, and, almost weeping, besought him not to be angry with her.

Angry? That he was not, but he was like one cut to the heart by a knife, and so excited that he could hardly avoid leaping to his feet to take instant and headlong flight; but he controlled himself, reassured her, made excuses for leaving and gained her promise that she would come again on the following night.

And then they said good-night, she adding a *hasta manana* in her soft Spanish tongue, and they parted in the grove and went their different ways.

Edgar watched until she reached the *casa* and then strode gloomily toward the village.

He was deep in thought as he went, and when he heard the pounding of horses' feet on the turf he gave no heed, scarcely realized that others were abroad; and it was not until dust was blown in his face that he realized a possibility of being ridden down.

He wheeled in time to see a dozen horsemen dashing madly along, and, being directly in their path, he shouted a warning, having no time to get clear of their solid front.

One instant he felt the hot breath of the horses on his face, and then a strong hand lifted him clear of the ground and he was deposited upon the saddle in front of its lawful occupant.

Before he could make a movement toward resistance, the unknown had pinioned his arms in a strong grasp and they swept madly along, bearing away from the village and raising a cloud of dust as they went.

Edgar looked at his captors and needed no revelation as to their identity. Their wild course and wilder costumes could belong to but one class of inhabitants; they were the men of El Alacran!

He swept a glance over the company. He did not see the robber chief, but, on the extreme left, Lady Jaguar rode with matchless ease and grace, her face still masked, her black hair floating in the wind.

The American somehow felt impressed by the sight. The idea of a robber queen was romantic, wild and strange, and he felt sure the mask hid a pretty face.

Certainly, she was attractive to a critical eye. Her form was less perfect than that of Donna Luisa, being almost too full for beauty, but it was as well as the average and her carriage was the very personification of grace.

He turned from his long survey to wonder as to what fate was in store for him. Evidently, he had not been seized without an object, but what could that object be? If it was plunder, he would prove a sorry prize, and, once before, this very band had turned in indifference from the temptation he offered when carrying ten times what he then had about his person.

"You are a sensible man, señor," observed the fellow who held him. "It wouldn't do you any good to struggle, and no harm shall come to you."

"What do you intend to do with me?" Edgar coolly asked.

"You will soon see, and then, in an hour's time, you shall return to San Pedro unharmed and every bit as rich as you are now."

"In that case, I'll take it easy. I've seen your crowd before, and was well used."

The Mexican, who was almost a giant in size, did not answer, and Edgar kept silent until, five minutes later, the party came to a halt.

They were beyond the sight of any dwelling and over a mile from San Pedro, but as Lady Jaguar rode forward and motioned the giant to

place his prisoner on his feet, the latter felt only a wonder at her intentions.

The men fell back out of hearing, leaving them alone.

"American," accosted the robber queen, in a slow, deep voice, "what are you doing at San Pedro?"

"I am looking the country over, *senorita*," he replied, taking his hat from his head.

"Is that your only object?"

"That is what I've been doing for the last year," was the evasive reply. "I am not in business."

"You are in a business which will bring you ruin unless you abandon it. Did not El Alacran warn you that your safety demanded prompt departure from San Pedro?"

"Yes, *senorita*."

"Then why do you stay?"

"Why should I go?"

"To save your life."

"In what way is it in danger?"

"If certain men knew of your interview in the grove to-night, your life would not be worth the price of a *cigarro*."

"Who are these men?"

"Manuel Villena and Alberto Pareja, but especially the latter. Beware of him. He is hot blooded, jealous and vindictive, and his knife is keen."

Edgar had watched the robber queen closely while they talked. That she had an interest in him was evident, but why was it? He was sure they had never met before. The mask concealed her face, but her form was not familiar, nor was the deep, even voice, which was almost masculine of inflection. The idea that she had conceived a tender passion for him at the meeting in the chaparral was not to be considered, for, in that case, she would not urge him to leave the country.

"When El Alacran warned me to leave San Pedro, I had not then seen the Villena *hacienda*," he answered, shrewdly.

"Had you never seen Donna Luisa?"

Edgar started.

"In Heaven's name," he said, "what do you know of a former meeting? What do you know of me or of Donna Luisa?"

"You hasten to conclusions, *senor*. I know nothing of a former meeting between you and the lady you saw in the grove to-night. Nay, *senor*, do not frown; I did not play the eaves-dropper in the grove; but when men talk with ladies across a *patio*, as you did last night, they necessarily speak in a voice audible to any chance neighbor."

Edgar was disappointed and disconcerted, and he only muttered:

"I see."

"Now, *senor*, accept a word of advice from one who wishes you well. Go at once and forever from San Pedro or your fate is sealed. The lady you saw to-night is mentally disordered, and you can do her no good, while, if your interference was known to Alberto Pareja, it would result in death to you."

Her manner was earnest and friendly and Edgar thanked her for her warning but made no pledge.

"May I ask why you take this interest in me?" he added.

"Because you are an American and a gentleman. Let that suffice. I will leave you now, but Sancho will carry you back to San Pedro, where, I trust, you will remain silent in regard to us."

"I will, surely; but, *senorita*, am I not to see you again?"

"Why should you?" she asked, in evident surprise.

"Are you not my friend?"

"I am the friend of all in trouble, but your remedy is in your own hands. Return to the United States and think no more of Donna Luisa, whom you can never possess, and all will be well. Neglect to go and misery awaits you. If trouble comes, remember that Lady Jaguar warned you. Adios!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE BLOW OF A KNIFE.

WITH the last word Lady Jaguar wheeled her horse and rode away, unheeding Edgar's impulsive request for her to remain, and Sancho, the giant, rode to his side.

"If you will mount, *senor*," he courteously said, "I will carry you to San Pedro."

"Isn't it too much for your horse?"

"He is a remarkable brute and good for twice my weight."

"Just as you say. Riding is easier than walking."

The American vaulted into the saddle and the horse at once started at a gallop.

Naturally, Edgar's thoughts were on the robber-queen and he began to question the man in regard to her, but Sancho administered a crushing rebuke by reminding him that his course was not exactly manly or reasonable, and Edgar relapsed into immediate silence.

The journey to the outskirts of the town was soon made, and there the American alighted, while Sancho wheeled his horse and shot away like an arrow.

Edgar at once started for his *meson*, and, just as he was about entering it, ran upon Harold and Roldan.

They manifested a surprise at seeing him which was unexpected, but all was soon made clear. When he went to *casa Villena* they had concealed themselves near enough to give aid if there was trouble, and, from a distance, had seen him captured by the robbers.

In this case, of course, they could do nothing, and, afterward, as Harold was in favor of alarming the people and the half-blood the reverse, an argument ensued which was happily ended by the arrival of the ex-captive.

They were anxious for particulars, but Edgar only said that he had escaped by felling one of the robbers, and promising Roldan full information in the morning, entered the inn with Harold.

The half-breed walked toward his *jacale* in a thoughtful mood.

"What new mystery has *Senor Lewis* got?" he wondered. "He never escaped in the way he says, and there is something he wishes to hide. However, it is none of my business. As long as he pays me well I will meddle with none of his secrets, and if he needs a strong arm in any trouble his money will make me a giant."

He had gone a little further when a cavalier passed at a rapid pace. Roldan looked after him and scowled viciously.

"You don't deign to notice the half-blood, my *Don Alberto*," he muttered, "but there was a time when you were not so stiff. I wonder what *Don Edgar* is trying to do at the Villena *casa*? If he sees fit to declare war on that tribe, I shall be glad to put my heel on your neck, *Don Alberto*."

"What did you call him?" asked a quiet voice at his elbow.

Roldan wheeled abruptly and saw an old man who was a moving monument of rags and dirt, evidently a beggar and a feeble one, too, if the way he leaned upon his staff was any criterion.

"What is that to you, old man?" he asked, sharply.

"Did I ask an impertinent question?" was the mild reply.

"No, but if you want to beg you need not apply there. You couldn't squeeze any gold from him."

"I asked for a name, not for money."

"*Caramba!* you are easily satisfied. Would n't you like a chance to pick my pocket?"

"You are in ill-humor, Roldan."

"Ah! you know my name."

"As you see."

"And what is yours?"

"I am the Wandering Jew."

"*Sancta Maria!* And who is the Wandering Jew?"

"Has your religion been so neglected, Roldan?"

"I have heard of a Jew who was eternally condemned to wander for crimes committed when the Christian era was new, but—"

"I am he!"

"*Sancta Maria!*"

Roldan said no more, but the smile on his face was an unbelieving one and the old man shook his head sadly.

"Roldan, you have a kind heart in spite of your crusty ways, but you are an unbeliever. Let it pass, however, and tell me the name of that proud cavalier."

"A cavalier who don't own the clothes on his back. He is poorer than you and me, despite his pride and lofty ways, but his heart is like flint. That is *Don Alberto Pareja*."

"You do not love him?"

"I know him too well."

"What harm has he done you?"

"Old man, you are too inquisitive. Say no more, for I have nothing to tell. Where will you sleep to-night?"

"In yonder inn."

"*Caramba!* is it so? I was about to offer the shelter of my *jacale*, but the inn is better."

"I'll not forget your kindness, Roldan, and very likely, we shall meet again."

"You'll find me around here all the time," answered the half-breed, and then he strode away toward his hut.

The Wandering Jew looked thoughtfully after him.

"A rough and ready man, but kind of heart," he commented, and then turned and walked slowly toward the *meson*.

Meanwhile, Edgar was pouring forth the story of his evening's experience to the attentive ears of Harold.

That part relating to Lady Jaguar was soon dismissed. Probably she had no motive for her kindness except natural good will, and though it was a trait not common in the world they let it pass.

In regard to Donna Luisa, they were greatly troubled. Beyond question she was deranged—Lady Jaguar had herself said so—but Edgar could not believe she had been so at the beginning of their acquaintance. He was firm in his belief that her present condition was the result of persecution on the part of *Don Manuel*, and though she seemed contented he felt that she must be rescued from his power. But how was it to be done? To rescue a sane person is one thing, to rescue an insane one a very different thing, especially when that person does not know they have a grievance.

First of all, Edgar decided that he must settle the fact that she was mad which could only be done by careful inquiry. Roldan knew of no such thing, but he was not a confidant of patricians.

This plan was all well in conception, but when, on the following day, they proceeded to carry it out, no one could be found who had heard that the *senorita* was not well in both mind and body. All their inquiries failed to gain them information, and they were somewhat staggered and could only grasp at the idea that *Don Manuel* had kept the matter secret for an interested motive.

Edgar waited the coming of night with impatience. An hour in the afternoon with the Wandering Jew, who had reappeared, interested him a little, for the man was often sensible in his madness, but he preferred for the most part to be alone.

Evening came and the American went once more to keep his appointment with Donna Luisa. His allies had promised to remain at their quarters, though very reluctantly, but he felt well able to care for himself.

The way had become familiar and he had no difficulty in gaining the cover of the grove. Luisa was not there, but he had expected to wait, and he sat down at the foot of a tree, fixed his gaze on the *casa* and patiently watched for her coming.

If he had taken the pains to examine the grove before he sat down, he might have saved himself serious trouble. As it was, he did not see the man who was crouched in ambush, knife in hand, his eyes full of fury as he gazed upon the American.

This man was Alberto Pareja, and he had come to the grove because a peon had that day told him that on the previous evening the Donna Luisa had met a stranger by stealth; and the cavalier, with his jealous and vindictive nature, had resolved to end the career of the rival lover at once.

He did not expect the lady to keep the appointment. He had made arrangements to have her prevented, but he had come instead, and there was murder in his heart.

For awhile he watched the American, whom he did not know, and then, silently as an Indian, he glided from his ambush and approached him.

Edgar heard nothing, suspected nothing. Well would it have been for him then if Roldan had been at his elbow.

The Mexican reached the tree, and with it partially between him and his victim, marked his situation well and prepared to strike.

His arm was raised, held stationary for a moment, and then, with all his force, he dealt the blow.

A double exclamation followed—a curse from the Mexican, for a twig had caught his arm and destroyed the accuracy of his stroke; and one of mingled pain and consternation from Edgar, for the knife had pierced his shoulder. Not fatally, however, and in a moment more he was on his feet and facing Pareja.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE WAYFARER.

DONNA LUISA fully intended to keep her appointment with the American, and, up to the twilight hour, she saw no reason why she could not do so. At that time she was outside the *casa*, rambling about in what seemed an aimless way, when the approach of a stranger attracted her attention.

The stranger was not a gallant, nor one in any way calculated to please the fancy of a maiden, for the first glance revealed him as one of the many beggars to be seen in all parts of Mexico.

He was old and feeble, with long gray hair and a bushy beard, his garments hung about him in tatters, while his whole appearance was pitiable as he moved slowly toward the house, leaning on a stout staff.

Yet, Donna Luisa knew he would find little sympathy there. Her uncle was no friend of beggars, and more than once she had seen them driven from the premises, but her own heart was warm toward the unfortunate. She had seen trouble herself and knew what it was.

So she bent a kindly look upon him as he slowly advanced and removed his worn *sombrero*.

"Pardon, lady," he feebly said, "but I am an unfortunate man and forced to ask favors when hunger and misfortune face me."

"There is no need of apology," she answered, frankly. "Your age and weakness are reason enough for your condition."

"May the Virgin bless you, *senorita*, and may you never know want yourself," was the earnest exclamation of the stranger.

A hard and bitter look crossed the face of Donna Luisa.

"What trouble can come to such as I?" she asked, in a deep voice.

"The sun may not always shine. There was a time when I was not an outcast, but the scene changed, and I am what you see."

"Can I aid you?" she asked, more gently.

"I have traveled ever since the rising sun, and my old limbs are weary. If I had a couch upon which to sleep, to-night, it would be more than food or medicine."

The *senorita* reflected. She was interested in the old man, but how was she to aid him? Don Manuel would not give him shelter, and there was no peon whom she dared ask to entertain him in his *jacale*.

"I suppose I might take you to the servants' quarters, inside the *casa*," she slowly said, "but you would have to remain very quiet and let no one know of your presence except myself and one servant."

"May the Virgin bless you, lady. All I need is a couch and a bit of food, and I will not stir from my bed until you bid me go."

"You shall have the shelter, and I hope all will be well. What is your name?"

"I had one once, but I have forgotten it. Ah! how changed are my fortunes! Call me Pedro, *senorita*, and pardon the boldness of a poor old man."

Donna Luisa saw that he could hardly stand from weakness, so she at once conducted him into the court, and from there to the servants' quarters. She had no fear of meeting Don Manuel or Alberto Pareja, and, as luck would have it, none of the peons were about.

She found the one servant whom she cared to trust, a faithful peon woman, and, bidding her attend to the wayfarer's wants, hastened away. It was nearing the time when she was to meet Edgar Lewis, and she went at once to her apartment to prepare for the venture.

An hour passed, and then, when she would have gone out, she found the door fastened upon her. The disappointment was a severe one, and she sunk into a chair, covered her face with her hands, and shed tears of real sorrow.

She well knew whence had originated her trouble. Before then she had experienced the persecution of Don Manuel, and she bowed before the blow without an attempt at relief.

Anon, she went to her window and looked out where, in the darkness, she could dimly see the trees of the grove.

"*Madre de Dios!*" she moaned, "why am I thus tortured? The gallant American awaits for me there, my fair-haired cavalier, but I cannot go to him. Oh! cruel uncle, to separate us two. Ah! how I love you, Don Edgar, and how I wish I could remember what you wish. Was I ever Barbara? Perhaps I was, but when I try to think my poor head whirls until I am dizzy and blind."

She cast herself on her couch, still weeping, and pressed her head between her hands.

Poor, mad Luisa! victim of fate, and the object of man's unjust tyranny!

In her own sorrow she had entirely forgotten the wayfarer she had aided, but he was not himself forgetful or asleep.

He had been given a little recess by himself after his supper was eaten, and in a place where no one would be likely to discover him, and then the peon woman went away and he was alone.

For two hours he lay upon his couch almost motionless, but later he sat upright and listened.

"The place is quiet and I think all have retired," he muttered. "They tell me Don Manuel does not keep late hours, which is all the better for me, as I can do my work and depart before day. It is easier to leave than to enter. Ah! Donna Luisa, I dislike to deceive you, for you are good and tender of heart, but you should not have trusted the wayfarer. Did I promise I would not leave my couch? It was a slip of my tongue; I intended to speak less definitely."

He carefully slipped from the bed and stood erect. He seemed much stronger than when he arrived at the *casa*, and did not deign a look toward his staff in the corner.

"May the Virgin guard me now and forgive me if I commit a crime. There was a time when I was not a thief, but fate has made me what I am."

He parted the curtains at the entrance to his niche and listened attentively. All was silent inside the *casa* and no lights were burning.

Noiselessly he passed through the entrance, dropped the curtains behind him and started from the recess.

No one appeared to bar his way or ask his purpose, and then he crept silently forward. Evidently, the way was well known to him, for without a mishap he advanced until the main part of the building was reached.

He paused before the entrance to the family reading-room, with the apartments of Don Manuel and his niece near at hand, but the silence reassured him and he passed through.

The apartment was dark, and, beyond a doubt without another occupant.

Then the wayfarer drew from under his rags a wax candle and started a blaze. One glance satisfied him the room was empty, and then he fixed his gaze upon a massive piece of furniture in one corner. Shelves at the upper half served as a resting-place for geological and other curiosities as well as for a few books, while the lower part had half a dozen drawers.

With evident eagerness the wayfarer opened the topmost of these. It contained only a few articles and those of a nature to attract no second glance.

He pushed them quickly aside from one corner and fumbled for a moment on the bottom. Then the board receded with a click as though moved by an invisible spring, revealing a second drawer a foot square, but unoccupied.

A deep shadow crossed the man's face, a look of bitter disappointment, and he stared straight at the bare boards.

"Gone!" he whispered, hoarsely, "gone!"

It was full two minutes before he stirred, and he seemed overwhelmed by his discovery, but gradually the look faded and he stood erect.

"I am foiled," he muttered, "but I will not give way to despair. While there is life there is hope. Don Manuel has been here before me, but the panther has teeth if his claws are cut. I will restore all to its former condition and escape while I can."

He closed the drawer, rearranged the disturbed articles and turned his face toward the door. One moment he paused on the threshold, extinguished his candle and glided away as he had come, reaching his recess undiscovered.

Then he secured his staff and once more left the place. This time, his course was toward the outer air, and, as he plainly knew the way well, it was not long before he stood outside the wall.

In going, he had not used his staff at all or showed any signs of physical weakness, and when, after a brief survey of the silent *casa*, he strode away, his step was like that of a young man.

He had gone a hundred yards when he saw ridden horses approaching and entered a thicket to escape discovery. Half a dozen gayly-dressed

men rode by at an easy trot, preceded by a woman, and the wayfarer looked at them with interest.

"It is Lady Jaguar and her bravos," he said, half-aloud. "*Caramba!* why wouldn't it be a good idea for me to seek the aid of the band? They could help me if they would, and I would make it worth their while. I wish I could see this robber-queen alone, but, very likely, she would spurn me."

The party soon disappeared from his sight, going toward the chaparral, and then he emerged from his cover and walked in the direction of the village.

CHAPTER XIV.

IN THE CHAPARRAL.

HAROLD DARE awaited the return of Edgar until a late hour, first with patience, but, later, with growing uneasiness. He could think of nothing except misfortune which could delay his friend there, and he had been warned by Lady Jaguar to beware of Villena and Pareja, so Harold at last grew too much worried to remain inactive at the *meson*.

He put on his hat, armed himself fully and walked toward the *hacienda*. The night was dark, obliging him to watch closely to see that Edgar did not pass him, but he seemed the only person abroad and reached the Villena grounds without an encounter.

Passing near the *casa*, he found all quiet and kept on toward the grove.

He had some reluctance about intruding there, but, as he heard nothing, finally entered the trees. The group was small and soon searched, but he found no sign of human occupancy. If Edgar and his mad lady-love had been there, they had left no sign of their visit.

"By my life!" exclaimed Harold, "something is wrong. Even if Edgar had decided to flee with her, he would not have gone without informing me. I will obtain the help of Roldan."

Acting on this idea, he had reached the edge of the grove when he saw a man approaching. He was afoot but, plainly, it was not Edgar, and Harold kept his place.

The man drew nearer and passed his cover, going toward the village, but he was no stranger.

"The Wandering Jew!" muttered the American.

"What in the world is he doing here? He has come from the direction of the *casa*, and it strikes me he shows less weakness than usual. He scarcely touches his staff to the ground and paces off like a soldier. However, I'll think of him anon and go to Roldan at once."

Without further waste of time, he hastened toward the *jacale* of the half-breed, on which errand we will for the time leave him and follow the fortunes of Edgar Lewis.

The blow from the knife of the Mexican had come so unexpectedly that he was for the time confused, but as he bounded to his feet and faced his would-be assassin, a realization of the situation came to him, and his usual coolness asserted its sway.

Nor was this all. Standing there in the dim light, so like that of another night he had seen when on the coast, he saw a strong resemblance between the man he had then met and the one with whom he now stood face to face.

The double conviction came to him that this cowardly assassin was Barbara's enemy, and that he was Alberto Pareja, and with a quick movement he drew a revolver and leveled it at the gaudy *serape*.

He was none too soon. Pareja had made a failure of his first attempt, but the old passions were unchanged, and knowing the importance of promptness, he gripped his knife and leaped forward to a second attack.

Edgar pulled the trigger, the hammer fell, but only a dull click followed. The weapon had missed fire!

There was no time to try another chamber; the Mexican was by his side, and Edgar, with a grave apprehension resulting from his failure and the blood pouring down his side, could only throw up the revolver as a shield when the assassin again struck.

The movement was a lucky one, in one sense, for the knife broke short off against the revolver, but the latter was torn from its owner's grasp.

Pareja uttered a curse and grappled with the American, and then ensued a fierce struggle.

The odds were against Edgar. He was wounded, perhaps fatally, and the suddenness

of the first assault and the failure of his fire-arm had demoralized him; but he met his enemy bravely and for awhile held his own.

Under ordinary circumstances the two would have been well matched, but soon the American began to lose strength, and he knew the situation was critical.

The end came sooner than either expected; Edgar tripped over a branch or stone and fell helplessly backward, carrying the Mexican with him, and then his head rung strangely as it struck with great force against a tree.

Pareja retained his hold, but Edgar did not stir.

"Caramba!" exclaimed the victor, after a pause; "this is remarkably good. The blow has dashed out his senses, sure as fate. *Carajo!* if I had my knife now I'd soon end his meddling forever; but never mind, I'll fix him."

He uncoiled a *lazo* from his body and deftly bound the American hand and foot, after which he placed him where no intruder would see him.

"There's no danger that Donna Luisa will come," he grimly said, "and, in ten minutes, I'll have the peon here. Then we'll throw him in the river, which never gives up its dead."

With a parting glance at the insensible man he hastened away. His course was toward the hut of a slave who had put him on Edgar's track, and, as he had said, he had the man there in ten minutes.

They entered the bushes, but only to meet with an unpleasant surprise. Edgar was gone.

Yes, search as they might, they could find no trace of the American. Where he had gone, and how, neither could guess. That he had help was evident, for Don Alberto had done the binding too well for self-rescue, but not a soul was in sight and no sign could be found in the darkness.

Pareja cursed until his breath was gone, but that did not help matters or divulge the mystery.

Edgar, himself, could have explained it at that moment for, a little before, he had regained consciousness, weak, confused and with a severe pain in his head, but sufficiently himself to know that he was on the back of a horse and in the arms of some man whom he at first took to be Pareja.

He looked about and saw he was in the midst of several horsemen, but the movement had attracted the attention of his fellow rider, who spoke in a friendly voice.

"Don't be alarmed, Don Edgar; you are with those who mean you well."

The voice was familiar, as was the face into which Edgar looked with astonishment.

"El Alacran!" he exclaimed.

"Exactly," replied the robber chief, calmly. "You see we are always around when wanted."

"You have saved my life, but I don't clearly understand. Pareja—"

"It is easily explained. I make it a point to know more than people give me credit for, and I knew you were going to meet Donna Luisa, to-night. I expected trouble and hovered near the grove to see fair play, but Alberto Pareja won the first move in the game. He was concealed there when you entered, a fact I did not suspect until I saw him leave the trees and hasten toward the huts of the peons. Then we entered the grove, found you bound hand and foot and brought you away, a fact which I suppose is now worrying your enemy a good deal."

"You have saved my life—that is unless the assassin's knife has gone too deep."

"Ha! you don't mean to say you are wounded?"

"He cut me in the shoulder, and, judging from my weakness, I have lost a good deal of blood."

"Sancta Maria! is it so? Then it must be seen to at once."

"If you will set me down at the edge of the village, I'll soon have a doctor."

"You must not return there. Alberto Pareja is on your track, and only extreme caution can save you from his thirst for blood."

"But, my friend—"

"Shall be notified at once. I will send a man to his hotel, but your only place of safety is in the chaparral."

"In the chaparral?"

"Yes, at my quarters."

"But—"

"Do you fear to trust me?"

"I trust you fully, but, to tell the truth, my life is not so aimless a one as you think. I have a work to do, and one which demands immediate care and zeal."

"The chaparral will be as near to your work and far safer than the village."

"But, dare you trust me to go and come to your place of refuge?"

"I dare trust you, and, even if I had not, I could continue to defy my enemies as I have done in the past."

The plan was not unpleasant to Edgar, but he thought and spoke of Harold. El Alacran met this objection by advising that Dare remain at the village for the present, pretending to know nothing of his friend's whereabouts; a course which would be safe for him, as he had not incurred Pareja's hatred, and Edgar demurred no further.

A hasty examination of his wound showed that it was no longer bleeding and was not serious, so further attention was for the time postponed.

By that time they were near the chaparral, and, a little later, the place was entered under circumstances most novel to the American.

In the midst of his trouble, he could not avoid thinking of Lady Jaguar, and he wondered if she would deign to give him a portion of her time.

CHAPTER XV.

ANOTHER WOMAN OF MYSTERY.

THE robbers rode forward in a way which showed they were traversing no strange road. They had entered the chaparral by the public way, but, after they branched off, Edgar soon lost all knowledge of the points of compass and cared less.

He had made up his mind to trust El Alacran fully, and, feeling that it would be unfair to gather ungiven information, he devoted his whole attention to gaining the most possible ease.

At times their course was through bushes which flapped in their faces and closed tightly behind them, but the band rode on in silence, single file, and the American borrowed no trouble.

When they halted he looked about with natural curiosity, but the trees made the darkness simply impenetrable to the human gaze.

"We are at our journey's end," said the chief. "Dismount, and I will at once conduct you to our den. It is in the inner world, as I may say, but we live better than many *hacendados* and you will want for nothing."

"I am not hard to suit," said Edgar, as he slid to the ground.

He was still weak and dizzy, but when El Alacran had given his arm the trouble became of little importance. They went a few paces through dense bushes, and then, before Edgar was aware of it, they had entered some sort of a passage.

The way was narrow but hard and firm under foot, and once, when they rubbed against his side, he put out his hand and touched solid rock.

"I do not intend to keep you in ignorance of your whereabouts," said El Alacran, "and to-morrow, I'll show you around. In return, I shall expect you to maintain strict secrecy when with others."

"You can rely on me," was the earnest reply.

A glimmer of light ahead then appeared and the chief continued:

"We are about to enter my family abode, and, in a short time, I'll have your wound dressed and a little medicine on your stomach."

The passage abruptly widened into a small room and El Alacran paused and allowed his guest to view it. Of solid rock was the roof and at least half of the sides, while the open spaces around had been filled with a dark-colored cement which formed the entire floor.

The place was destitute of furniture, except at the center, where a slab of stone lay upon two boulders and a quartet of rosters sat upon stools and manipulated a pack of greasy cards around the rude table thus made.

"This is our audience-chamber," said El Alacran, "where these good fellows, who are guards, would give a warm reception to any intruder. Of the two doors you see, the right leads to the men's quarters, the left to my own and those of Lady Jaguar. We will keep to the left."

They passed through another short passage and entered a room which was furnished like a *hidalgo's* parlor. Edgar saw a carpeted floor,

curtain hung walls, sumptuous furniture and a collection of curiosities, and, even in his weakness, felt a surprise which found expression in words.

"I shall show you more, to-morrow, but let us now to my private room," said El Alacran.

They entered another chamber, much like the first except that it contained a bed, and the robber led his guest to an easy-chair.

Edgar was glad enough to sit down, and he lay back on the cushions while his host made preparations for dressing his wound.

As he prepared lint and bandages, the American surveyed him more closely than ever before. He saw a man of large frame, with a powerful but graceful body, while his face was one full of power and manly comeliness. It was a good, true face, too, if Edgar read it aright, and he wondered more than ever to find such a man an outlaw.

The wound was soon examined and dressed. It proved to be only of the flesh and not at all dangerous, despite the freedom with which it had bled, and he felt comfortable and almost contented as he reclined in the chair after the work was done.

"I like that," said El Alacran, approvingly. "By this time your friend knows all about you, and there is nothing for you to worry about."

"You forget that I told you I had work to do here," answered Edgar.

"I forget nothing, *amigo mio*, but your work will not suffer by this event. In saying this, I speak as truly as I did when I warned you of trouble unless you left San Pedro. If you had gone then, you would have escaped the knife of Alberto Pareja."

"Captain," said the American, earnestly, "I wish you would tell me how you know so much about my affairs."

"It is a natural desire, but you can scarcely expect me to divulge my sources of information."

"In matters concerning you and your band, I cannot; but why should you hesitate to tell what you know of me?"

"Don't you know as much, and more, concerning yourself, than I do?"

"I begin to doubt it; but, seriously, I am puzzled by you and—and Lady Jaguar."

"What of her?" asked El Alacran, showing sudden interest.

"She, too, warned me of Alberto Pareja."

"*Amigo*, listen to me. I have seen much of your nation in the past, and the association was so pleasant I like all Americans. As such I would save you from trouble, and, when I saw you about to put your head into jeopardy, I gave you fair warning. Don Edgar, excuse me, but you are following a phantom. Your search will not benefit you, but the road leads to wretchedness, if not to death."

"In Heaven's name, what do you mean?"

"I mean you well."

"Then keep me no longer in the dark."

"Would you have me break a solemn promise?"

"If you cannot speak, let me see the one to whom you made the promise."

"Impossible. Don Edgar, take my advice and leave Mexico."

"I might well say the same to you. If you like my country, why do you not go there instead of living here as a hunted outlaw?"

The pleasant face of the robber suddenly grew stern and merciless, and his voice was deep as he replied:

"Do you think that you alone have a work to do? You seek a phantom in the shape of a woman who can never become yours, while I work—nay, I live for vengeance!"

The subdued passion in his voice awed Edgar, who could make no suitable reply, but it was followed by a laugh, evidently forced, and the outlaw added:

"*Caramba!* I am growing dramatic. Do not mind me, but let your own affairs be at once attended to. You ask what I know of you. Lady Jaguar can answer that question better than I, for her information is greater. I will send her to you and let you hear what she knows."

With these words El Alacran arose and abruptly left the room.

Edgar felt a fresh interest, for, in spite of himself, the robber-queen had already gained a hold upon his feelings. It was not love, and he was not enough of an idiot to imagine she cared for him, since she had tried to send him away, but there was a charm about her which he freely acknowledged.

He fixed his gaze upon the door, and, at the end of five minutes, Lady Jaguar entered with the grace peculiar to well-bred Spanish women.

She was clad in a plain but becoming costume, while a mask of unusual size concealed her whole face except the dark, handsome eyes, which he felt sure were in keeping with her whole face.

Edgar arose with the instinct of a gentleman, but she waved him back with her hand.

"Retain your seat, Don Edgar. If you would speedily recover from your wound, you must be discreet," she said, in the old, calm, deep voice.

"I am not so sure that I wish to recover if it be the means of sending me from here," he could not help saying.

"Gallantry, Don Edgar, is not for the chaparral and outlaws," was the cold reply, as the lady seated herself near him.

"Why do you call yourself an outlaw? Judged from my standpoint, you are—"

"An outlaw still," she interrupted, calmly. "But, enough of this. I did not come to speak of myself. El Alacran said you were here and wounded, and I came at his bidding. I am sorry for you, but you will remember I warned you plainly."

"You did, and I owe all this to my own disobedience. El Alacran also gave me hope that you would explain how you came to know so much of me."

"You mistake. He said I would tell *what* I know of you, not how I gained my information."

"I accept the correction. Well, then, to open the field, what do you know of me?"

"You have heard of men who spend their lives in trying to create gold from baser metals?"

"Yes."

"Did one of them ever succeed?"

"Not that I am aware of."

"They are mad to try, but you are equally so to follow a shadow in the shape of a woman."

CHAPTER XVI.

LADY JAGUAR'S WARNING.

PROBABLY, Edgar Lewis had never seen a more novel and perplexingly interesting moment in his life. To sit face to face with this masked and mysterious robber queen was strange in itself, but with all the other mysteries added it was doubly so. He felt sure she was young and handsome, but when, man-like, he would have indulged in gallantry, the uncertainty stifled the words and annoyed him.

"How do you know I am seeking a woman or any other shadow?" he retorted.

"How I know, I am not to tell, but that I do know, I will convince you. You can not deny that you have gone to the *casa Villena* to see a woman, for the knife-wound in your side is the proof. Don Edgar, is Barbara worth all this?"

The American started. He felt that his secret was indeed known, and a natural aversion to making a confidante of a stranger worried him for a moment, but he remembered what was at stake and steadily replied:

"If you knew Barbara, you would not ask the question. She is worth every sacrifice a man can make, worth the peril of life."

"What is a madwoman to you?"

The great black eyes were fixed keenly on his face, and she saw he fairly writhed under her words.

"Have mercy, Lady Jaguar. If she is mad what made her so?"

"What do you think?"

The question came calmly, after a pause, but his answer was hot and impetuous.

"Wrong, cruel, unmerited wrong."

"Your faith is strong."

"It is, Lady Jaguar. I think you are scoffing at me, but I act according to my nature."

"I do not scoff, but I marvel at such faith. I myself have seen little of it."

"You say she is mad, and you told me so once before. Now, tell me who have been her persecutors. Are they Manuel Villena and Alberto Pareja?"

"You have expressed the opinion that it was the latter who drove Barbara away from the cabin on the coast."

"When did I say so?"

"Not here, nor yet to me. Still, you have said so."

"Yes."

"Well, to let you see your peril the more clearly, I admit it was so. More than that, he will kill the man who comes between him and his prey."

"In the future I will be ready for him."

"Do you mean to say you will persist in this madness?"

"I shall persist in trying to help Barbara, or Luisa, if that is her name," was the firm reply.

"Enough. Now, Don Edgar, let me say to you that your stubbornness will end in your own ruin. More than that, the mad girl will never again be the Barbara for whom you cared. Her reason is hopelessly gone, so what could she be to you even if she was ready to go with you?"

"Heaven only knows!"

"You have sought long and earnestly for the idol who went so abruptly from the cabin of Pedro Lopez, and for this you deserve great praise, but if Barbara was sane to-day she could never be anything to you. Between you two is a gulf which only death can bridge, so you must look to the next world if you would find her."

"What is that gulf?" Edgar impetuously asked.

"I have promised not to tell."

"Whom did you promise?"

"Barbara."

"Before she became insane?"

"Yes."

"But does not your obligation end with the loss of her reason?"

"My pledge becomes doubly sacred."

"And am I never to know that secret?" the American demanded, starting from his chair.

"It is best you never should."

"And why so?"

"You would despise Barbara if you knew."

Edgar made one stride and caught the arm of Lady Jaguar in a remorseless grasp.

"Woman," he hissed, "beware what you say. I will not stand here tamely and hear you insult her. I tell you there is no crime at her door, and only your sex at this moment saves you from chastisement."

The robber queen shrank under his touch and before his passion like a dying woman. Her strength seemed all gone, her breath came gaspingly, her bosom heaved, and only for his frenzy Edgar would have been alarmed.

As it was, her emotion seemed to him more like the alarm of guilt, and he added:

"Who are you, anyway, who dares sit there and rend my heart? I am tempted to tear that mask from your face!"

"Since when did Edgar Lewis become an assailant of women?" gasped Lady Jaguar.

The rebuke was enough, and he released her arm with a groan.

"I was mad! mad! but you went too far! I can bear the rack upon which you have put me, if I must, but Barbara's name is sacred to me."

He returned to his chair, covered his face with his hands, and remained for some time silent and motionless. When he looked up again Lady Jaguar was looking at him in evident composure.

"I owe you an apology, and I make it humbly," he said. "Forget my violence, and rest assured it shall not be repeated."

"You are fully forgiven, though I do not blame you. You have proved your loyalty to the woman you love, and I only wish that affection was not a vain one."

"It may be vain, but hear me, madame, when I say that I shall not go away as you advise. I shall remain and face my fate, while between me and Alberto Pareja there is undying war."

"I shall oppose you no further," said Lady Jaguar, slowly, "but I warn you a drama of blood is about to be begun, and whatever the result, there can be no happiness for you."

"If that red drama crushes me, others shall fall in the same battle," was the steady response.

"I am not so sure of that. You will work openly, but your enemies are those who work in the dark and stab in the back. Beware of Alberto Pareja and Senor Villena."

"Will you not go so far as to tell me why they persecute Barbara?"

"It is all because of the Villena estate. The property is hers, and as they are of that class of men who will sell their souls for gold, they are resolved to secure the prize at any cost."

"Will not the law protect her?"

"The law is with the rich and powerful, and Barbara is only a feeble girl."

"Do you know her personally?"

"We have often been together, but the female outlaw and the Villena heiress are very different persons."

"Still, you pity her?"

"I do," answered Lady Jaguar, huskily.

"Suppose she could be rescued from her prison, would you give her shelter here?"

"In her madness, the girl looks upon me with unfriendly feelings. She would not come here."

Edgar was disappointed, and relapsed into moody silence. Lady Jaguar also seemed inclined to confer with her thoughts, and for a considerable time no words passed between them.

The silence was broken by the entrance of El Alacran. He informed Edgar that Harold Dare had been notified regarding the new turn of affairs, and was willing to play his part.

"He will remain at the *meson* and pretend to be anxious about you, which will perplex Pareja. I do not believe the latter can trace you, and if he should, he would fare badly in the chaparral. One thing worries me—that half-blood, Roldan, was with Senor Dare when my man found him, and though he made the communication privately, I fear your friend will confide in the Mestizo."

"I think Roldan is trustworthy," said Edgar.

"Very likely, as long as he is well paid, but if he thought Manuel Villena would give him more gold than you, he would go at once and sell his secret."

"I did not think this of him."

"I learnt his way by bitter experience, or, at least, he made it known in a manner most foul and cowardly. Once, I trusted and liked him, but the blood of an innocent man is partially at his door, and for that, one of these days, Roldan will get his neck broken."

Edgar said no more. El Alacran's subdued passion was not to be trifled with, and he allowed the half-blood to go undefended, though he was not fully convinced.

Lady Jaguar excused herself and went away, and, as Edgar saw the robber chief yawning, he suddenly remembered he was himself a wounded man and apologized for engaging attention to so late an hour of the night.

He was shown to a sleeping-room by El Alacran, and, as he felt neither pain nor inconvenience from his wound, he was soon asleep and resting as calmly as though his couch was not in the midst of an outlaw camp and his life not in danger from skulking foes.

CHAPTER XVII.

AN OMINOUS VISITOR.

ON the following evening, Don Manuel Villena was seated alone in his reading-room and his manner was one of deep thought. He had more of literary taste than was common among his neighbors, being a close student of Spanish and Mexican history, but the book he had a short time before taken from a shelf lay unheeded on his lap and he was gazing steadfastly at vacancy.

His was not a face to inspire confidence. A life of scheming and self-worship had left its mark on his firm, imperious face, and the master of *casa Villena* was known as a haughty, selfish man who had few associates and fewer friends.

His early life had been full of such troubles as beset the poor, for he had been penniless with little hope of improving his condition. The death of his cousin, Leon, had left him seeming master of the *hacienda* and its wealth, and, under his close management, the property had greatly increased in value.

Such, in brief, was the stern-faced man who sat absorbed in thought in his study, a rumination which, pleasant or otherwise, was finally interrupted by the coming of a servant who announced that a gentleman wished to see him.

Don Manuel, usually careful as to whom he received in his room, was annoyed at being disturbed, and, scarcely knowing what he said, he petulantly ordered the unknown caller to be admitted.

Then he again grew absorbed in thought, only to be aroused by the entrance of the stranger himself.

This time, Don Manuel wheeled around with a scowl on his face, but the curt words on his lips died away at sight of the new-comer. He saw a man of about thirty years, with a large, strong form, a squarely-cut, resolute face,

wherein lay evidence of a will as powerful as his own, while his rich and tasteful dress bespoke him a cavalier of no mean standing.

It suddenly occurred to Don Manuel then that the friendship of this man might be of value to him. Clearly, he was of patrician stock, and the wily *haciendero* was always ready to cringe at the feet of those having wealth and power.

His frown vanished and he arose quickly, motioned the peon away and greeted the stranger cordially, but the latter quietly interrupted him.

"I have come on business, Don Manuel," he said, "and there is no occasion for ceremony. Let us cast all that to the winds and talk like old acquaintances. Thanks, señor, I will take a seat."

And then the stranger calmly accepted the easy-chair to which the *haciendero* had pointed, while the latter eyed him closely.

"He says he comes on business," thought Don Manuel. "Perhaps he is from the government, come to offer me an official post. I will use him like a brother."

Then, after the fashion of the wide world, he spoke of the weather and kindred subjects, to all of which the unknown politely replied, never offering to introduce himself, but betraying an interest in the room and its furniture not wholly in keeping with good breeding.

"I have told you that I am come on business," he at last said, breaking a pause in the conversation, "and I will at once explain myself. You have, I believe, been in possession of *hacienda Villena* for about ten years."

"Yes, señor," said Don Manuel, a little surprised.

"Previous to which time it was the property of Don Leon Villena?"

"Exactly, señor."

"You are not, however, the owner of the estate, if I am rightly informed."

"There you are mistaken, señor. I am sole owner."

"I had understood that you held the property in trust for Juan Villena, the younger brother of the aforesaid Leon."

"On the contrary, all passed unreservedly to me after the death of Leon."

"Then he is really dead?"

"He is supposed to be so. If you know the particulars of that unhappy affair—"

"I have heard them, but, will you oblige me by giving the exact facts?"

"I will, señor, though the subject is a painful one. My cousin, Leon, was ten years ago seized as a conspirator against the government and imprisoned in the fort which now stands in ruins over yonder. From there, he in some way escaped, since which time he has never been heard from or seen. He was looked upon as dead, his property confiscated and bestowed unreservedly upon me."

"But what of his brother, Juan?"

"Juan was twelve years younger than Leon, and, when a hot-headed, impulsive boy of eighteen, he left here without a word of farewell to any one. Twelve years have passed, but he has never returned."

"Does not the *hacienda*, by right, belong to him?"

"By right of descent, it would, but the place was seized as the property of a traitor and bestowed upon me."

"But what of Leon's wife and daughter?"

"No provision was made for them, but I have done my best. The wife did not long survive her husband, but Donna Luisa has ever since been under my care."

"Is she now here?"

"Yes, señor."

"It is rumored that she is slightly deranged, mentally. Is this so?"

Don Manuel had been writhing under this catechism. For reasons of his own, he would rather have talked on any other subject, and he was both annoyed and troubled to know the object of this cool, self-confident stranger. The last question angered him, but he kept his temper from notice.

"I regret to say the poor child is at times a trifle light-headed," he answered.

"Well, to return to Don Leon, did you then regard him as guilty of treason?"

"He was so pronounced by the authorities, señor. Of course I had a fraternal sympathy for him, but, after this lapse of time, it is not well to dig up the old wound."

There was a plain hint in the answer, and a tinge of menace, the visitor thought, but he was not one to be easily intimidated.

"Who were his accusers?" he continued calmly.

"Their names were never given. The case did not come to trial, and, after the death of Leon, I let the matter drop. It was a sad affair."

"You name it well, Don Manuel Villena; it was a sad affair, and one of the foulest in the history of Mexico."

The manner of the stranger had abruptly changed. His voice had deepened, becoming stern and impressive, and the *haciendero* moved uneasily in his chair.

"You have given your version of the affair; now allow me to give mine," added the visitor.

"Proceed, señor."

"Twelve years ago, Don Manuel, you were a penniless young man, too proud and indolent to work, a dependent on the bounty of your cousin, Leon. He fed and clothed you, and you apparently was his bosom friend. The scene changed, however, when the boy Juan ran away to seek a life of adventure. From the first, it seemed to you he would never return, and, at once, you fell to thinking that if Leon, too, was out of the way, you would gain possession of the Villena estate."

"Señor?" cried Don Manuel, but the stranger waved his hand impatiently.

"At that time you had a bosom friend, one Alberto Pareja, a man somewhat your junior in point of years, but very much like you, as the sequel will prove. You went to him and stated your wishes, and then, little by little, your plans were laid. You promised Pareja a life of ease if he would aid you to gain the prize, and, together, you laid the plan. Leon must be removed; that much was clear, but a knife-thrust in the back would still leave Juan and little Luisa in your way and you sought for a better course."

"After careful deliberation and planning, your trap was sprung. Leon was arrested for treason. You say you do not know his accusers; I say they were Alberto Pareja and yourself!"

"It is a base lie!" cried the *haciendero*; but again the stranger stopped him with a wave of his hand.

"Your plot worked well, and Leon was confined in the old fort, but it was not a part of your scheme to allow him a trial; you did not wish to give him a chance for life or to know his accusers."

"One dark night you and Pareja went to the fort, accompanied by Roldan, the half-breed, and Leon was rescued. You fawned upon him and he never suspected the truth, and then you led him away from the place."

"You say he was not seen afterward. I will tell you why: You ended that night's work by throwing Leon, bound hand and foot, into the swift water of the river, and there he found his grave."

"Carajo! it is false!" cried Don Manuel, with a snarl like that of a tiger, and he started to his feet with a murderous gleam in his eyes.

"We will assume that it is true," said the stranger, with perfect calmness. "Pray sit down, Don Manuel, and let me finish. There are other things you want to know before you call your peons to throw me out of *casa Villena*."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE VISITOR'S DEMAND.

THE *haciendero* sunk back into his chair, but his manner was still tiger-like. He was surprised, confused and astounded, but he was not one to be overwhelmed by unfavorable events, and already he had doomed this stranger to death.

"We will assume that the death of Leon lay at the door of Pareja, Roldan and yourself, Don Manuel, and glance at what followed. The search for the escaped prisoner was in vain, for the river did not give up its dead, and so the Government took action in regard to the estate. You have given your version of its course; I will now give mine."

"You were placed in charge, but only as a keeper of the property. It was decreed that if Juan returned within eleven years, the whole was to be his; if not, all became Luisa's when she reached her nineteenth birthday."

"I tell you it is false."

"And I say it is true."

"Prove it," sneered Don Manuel.

"There was once documentary proof, and this proof was kept in the old *alcalde's* building

near the fort. Six years ago the building was burned, as you well remember, and the fire consumed the papers."

"Ah!" said Don Manuel.

"The building was fired, at your command, by one of your peons."

"Carajo! you lie!"

"It was a cunning move, but you did not go far enough. You allowed the peon to live after his work was done, and a year ago he disappeared from your *hacienda* and your knowledge."

"What of that?"

"Much, for I can produce the man."

"In court?"

"Being a peon, his word would avail nothing in law. I only wish to show you what threads of evidence I hold."

"And who, in the fiend's name, are you, anyway?" the *haciendero* demanded.

"I am Juan Villena!"

The unwelcome visitor made this announcement in a calm, matter-of-fact way, and Manuel, who had expected such a claim, showed no surprise. He did not like the situation, but he felt that he was master of it.

"Perhaps you can prove that—by a peon," he sneered.

"I can easily prove my identity, señor."

"I doubt it, and I, for one, do not believe your claim. There is no trace of Villena blood in your face."

"I admit that I do not resemble Don Leon, but I am his brother, the runaway boy, Juan."

"Well, why are you here?" was the haughty demand of the undismayed *haciendero*.

"To claim my own."

"What is that?"

"All the Villena wealth."

"How do you propose to get it?"

"Not as you did, nor yet by any species of assassination. A year ago I had nothing on which to base my claim; now, I have much. I am here, to-night, Don Manuel, to give you a fair chance. All the Villena property is mine and I propose to secure it. If you admit that you are merely here as a guardian and surrender it to me, so much the better for you. If you are stubborn, I shall get the prize just the same, while you will sink in the flood-tide of your crimes."

"How do you propose to get the prize?"

"Caramba! do you think me a fool to state my plans to you?"

"You have none. You know you can do nothing, so you seek to frighten me. The plan will fail, while, if you are ugly, I will hand you over to the authorities."

Juan, to call the man by the name he claims, elevated his eyebrows in surprise.

"On what charge?"

"You may not be aware of the fact, but, when Leon was condemned, his brother, Juan, was also outlawed. Your life, if you are Juan, depends on your keeping yourself unknown."

"Another fiction of yours, Don Manuel. I was not outlawed, and I do not fear your spite."

"You are safe if you are silent; otherwise, the law shall take its course. If you are found in Mexico, you are doomed."

"It is useless to argue further, but I will tell you, in brief, why I am here. I have returned, inside the fixed time, to claim my own, and I will have it. Eight months hence, unless I make my claim, Donna Luisa becomes sole possessor of all, but, before then, I shall be master of Villena!"

"Fool!" said Don Manuel, harshly. "I am tired of this talk and will hear no more. Will you go hence of yourself, or shall I call my peons?"

"Do not trouble yourself, for I am ready to go. Once for all, however, do you still defy me?"

"I certainly do."

"Very well, I am ready to go. You shall hear from me again, however, and when you do it will be in a manner different from this. I swear by the holy Virgin I will have my rights!"

Manuel was about to answer when a rap sounded at the door, and then followed a female voice asking permission to come in.

The *haciendero* glanced quickly at Juan, and then, as though on a sudden impulse, strode to the door and opened it.

"Enter, *querido mio*," he gently said, and then the unwelcome guest saw a young lady glide into the apartment with a graceful air

and almost childish delight at some vague reason.

She stopped short at sight of the stranger, exhibiting an embarrassment not to be expected, but the old manner returned as Don Manuel calmly said:

"Luisa, my dear, this is Don Juan, a distant relative of our family."

He looked keenly at the visitor with evident curiosity to see how he would conduct himself, but nothing could exceed the composure of Juan.

He greeted Luisa with distant but kindly courtesousness, after the fashion of his country and day, and the girl at once seemed drawn toward him by a chord of sympathy.

"I am glad, very glad to see you, Don Juan. We see so few people here it is dull, but the place is pretty, isn't it? Don't you think it pretty, Don Juan?"

It needed no explanation for him to see that this childishness was another phase of her madness, and he assured her that he agreed with her and her face grew happy.

She seated herself and prattled on for some time like a girl of half her years, laughing gleefully at times, while Don Manuel looked on in grim silence. This mood had been upon the mad girl all day and he wished to see its effect upon Juan—to have him see that she was not unhappy.

What the visitor really thought could not be told. His powerful face was unreadable. He talked gently and kindly to her, but there was no trace of sympathy.

"She is very much like her mother," the *haciendero* at last observed.

"The resemblance is strong," said Juan, calmly.

"Her forehead, though, is like the Villenas'."

"Yea."

Evidently, the visitor considered his business done, for, after a little time with Luisa, he arose and announced his speedy departure. The girl remonstrated, but he assured her he would come again, and then, without further words of menace to Don Manuel, the claimant left the *casa*.

Once outside, he looked keenly around and then strode away toward the village. He had no doubt but that the *haciendero* would put a peon on his track, but, for reasons of his own, he had no desire to be followed, and he trusted to quick movements to foil any such attempt.

Plainly, the way was well known to him, and, in a short time, he was at the outskirts of the village. There was no sign of a pursuer, but, while hurrying along, he came face to face with a man so suddenly that they almost collided in the darkness.

"*Caramba!*" said the other, cheerily, "that was a narrow escape."

Juan looked keenly at the speaker. The voice had sounded familiar, and so too was the face and form. The man was Roldan, the half-blood.

"What you mean, fellow?" said Don Juan, angrily. "Can't I move about without being run over by such as you?"

Roldan was evidently surprised, but he had a cooler nature than is common among his race, and his voice was calm and even as he replied:

"Pardon, senor, but I see no occasion for anger. I have not yet touched you."

"But you stopped me," persisted Juan.

"You are at liberty to move on at any time."

"No insolence, sirrah, or I will chastise you."

Roldan's patience was becoming exhausted. He had neither fear nor particular respect for fine clothing, and believing this was some wine-filled cavalier who only wanted to show his importance, he retorted:

"It requires a good man to chastise me, so you had better not attempt it."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth before an iron grasp was laid on his arm, and only a quick and scientific movement warded off the blow which Don Juan had aimed at his head. Then in a moment more the two had grappled like rival gladiators.

CHAPTER XIX.

A MUSCULAR BEGGAR.

DON JUAN had obeyed a sudden impulse in forcing this quarrel upon Roldan. He had seen in him a man he had sworn to kill, though

for reasons of his own he wished to spare him for awhile, but the sight of his hated face was too much for his calmness, and he resolved to give him the first installment of revenge then and there.

He soon found, however, that he had undertaken a very difficult task. Roldan was strong, quick and skillful, and every attempt to throw him or gain a decided advantage was unsuccessful.

Juan had never met his equal in such a contest, and he soon found that he had no cause to fear the half-breed, but the latter, by acting on the defensive, foiled every attempt to worst him.

Back and forth they struggled like wild beasts, Juan fighting in grim silence, while his opponent ever and anon uttered a sarcastic comment as he baffled effort after effort.

Both grew weary before the result could be seen, but Roldan was suddenly surprised to have his assailant loosen his hold with an exclamation of pain, and he staggered back just in time to see him receive a heavy thump on the head from the staff of a man who had just appeared on the scene.

"*Begone!*" cried this man, shrilly. "Get thee hence, assassin, or I'll beat your head to a jelly!"

Juan had received two blows from the staff, and having no desire to cope against odds, he promptly wheeled and darted away in the darkness.

"*Hal ha!*" laughed the new-comer, "see the coward run!"

Roldan did not answer. There was revenge in his heart, but he was searching for his knife which had fallen to the ground, and, by the time it was found, he realized that it was too late for pursuit.

He stood erect and looked at his rescuer. Then he uttered an exclamation of surprise as he recognized the Wandering Jew.

"*Caramba!* is it you, old man?"

"As you see," answered the beggar, calmly.

"*Sancta Maria!* it seems to me you are not so feeble as you were the other night."

"I have rested since then, *amigo*."

"You wielded that staff like a bull-fighter. The knave will have a sore head for it."

"Why did he assault you?"

"For no reason, at all. He was some fellow crazed by wine, but his muscle was amazing and I thank you for your interference. I'll do as much for you, sometime."

"You asked me the other night to go to your *jacale*. I will go there now, if you are willing, and rest awhile."

Roldan willingly agreed, and a short walk took them to the hut.

As they went, they were not aware that they were followed by a man who afterward peered in upon them through a crevice in the wall, but such was the fact, and the man was a peon belonging to the *hacienda* of Don Manuel.

The latter, as Juan had expected, had promptly set a man upon his track, and the pursuer had just sighted him when the affray took place. He hovered at a distance until it was over, and then, getting nearer to Roldan and the Wandering Jew, rushed to the conclusion that one of them was the man he wanted, and that they had been set upon by some brawler whom they put to flight.

Looking in through the crevice, he saw and recognized both. The half-breed he had known all his life, and the man of rags he knew had lately come to San Pedro.

"He must be the one," thought the spy.

"He looks weak and inoffensive, but he wielded his staff lustily and must be in disguise. Don Manuel must be satisfied, so I'll tell him I saw the fellow put on his rags inside this *jacale*."

With this resolution, the peon arose and hastened back to the *hacienda*. If he had remained and listened, he might have heard something of interest for, just then, conversation was assuming an interesting turn.

"Roldan," said the Wandering Jew, "do you know any of the members of El Alacran's band?"

"Not I," and Roldan shrugged his shoulders.

"Do you think they could be trusted to aid a man in a secret work?"

"They could, if the work was to lighten his pocket."

"I judge you don't think highly of them."

"You judge aright, old man."

"I should think you might know something of them, since your trade is that of a guide."

"I am a bull-fighter, horse-tamer, hunter and guide, but I have not yet found any one who wants to be guided to El Alacran's quarters."

"Not even the soldiers?"

"*Sancta Maria!* they would not trust me."

"Yet you are good and true, Roldan."

"How do you know?"

A grave smile played over the face of the beggar for a moment but speedily vanished.

"Men call me a madman and fool, Roldan, but I know more than some sane men. Let me whisper in your ears, Roldan."

The half-breed, willing to humor the whim of the old man, bent his head, but he started back like a flash as the Wandering Jew uttered a few rapid sentences.

Then he sat staring dumbly, while the old man smiled again, but, just then, a rap at the door startled both.

The Wandering Jew was speedily himself, but Roldan seemed filled with consternation.

"What shall we do?" he demanded. "They must not find you here—you must flee—your life is in great peril."

"Be calm," was the steady response. "How are they to know that the mad beggar holds important secrets? Even if they did, what good would come of silencing his tongue? Open!"

The rapping imperiously continued, and, at a motion from the old man, Roldan slowly opened to those without.

He saw the man who had done the knocking, a stout fellow in a gaudy attire, while, just behind him, were several ridden horses, on the foremost of which was Lady Jaguar.

The robber queen leaped to the ground and would have pushed past Roldan, but, with wonder and alarm in his face, he held her back.

"You can't enter here," he firmly said.

Lady Jaguar had looked keenly about the little hut, ending by fixing her gaze upon the beggar.

"Old man, who are you?" she demanded.

"A humble and lowly wanderer, senora," the Wandering Jew replied, his gaze never wavering under her regard.

"There is some mistake, somewhere," she continued, hurriedly, "but, if you value your life, you had better go away from here. Roldan, you know Don Manuel Villena?"

"Yea, senorita," replied the half-blood, trying to act calmly.

"He has just been told that an enemy of his is in your hut, and, though it is a mistake, his assassins may soon be here. Old man, the sooner you leave, the better for you."

Lady Jaguar turned back to her horse, but Roldan caught her arm, only to have his hold instantly thrown off.

"Pardon, senorita, but will you explain?" he humbly said.

"For the sake of that old man, I will. Don Manuel sent one of his peons to dog an enemy of his. The man returned and reported that the said enemy was in this hut with you, disguised as a beggar. I know now that the man was mistaken, but, unless your friend keeps out of his way, he is liable to get a knife-thrust in his heart. I have warned you both and my duty is done."

She leaped lightly into her saddle, only to be stopped by the Wandering Jew, who had emerged from the hut, leaning feebly on his staff.

"Lady," he said, "for the Virgin's sake, do not leave me here. I am old and helpless and cannot defend myself. Take me away and save my life."

The Queen looked down on him, haughtily at first, then with a softening glance.

"I am sorry that I cannot aid you, but, in five minutes, I must be far away. This man," pointing to Roldan, "can help you."

She started her horse, but the Wandering Jew put out his hand.

"Tell me," he cried, "who is this enemy of Don Manuel Villena?"

"*Quien sabe?*" she answered, and then, as one person, the wild riders wheeled their horses and swept away in the darkness.

The beggar remained looking after Lady Jaguar until Roldan touched him on the arm.

"We must go," said the half-breed.

"We will go, but I wish my question had been answered. Who is this enemy of Don Manuel? Some one, perhaps, who, like me, has a great work to do. I have sworn to do that work, and, though I cannot make the

grave give up its dead, I must live and in some way right the wrongs of the living."

As he spoke, Roldan was hurrying him away, and only half his words were audible, but the half-breed muttered after him:

"True, the grave will not give up its dead, but the girl still lives, and this man, who knows so much, may right her wrongs."

CHAPTER XX.

PAREJA SEES A SPECTER.

THE morning after his arrival at El Alacran's retreat, Edgar Lewis awoke in far better condition than was to be expected. He was still weak from loss of blood, but, thanks to good surgery and a good constitution, there was nothing which could compel him to remain inactive.

Pareja's knife had not touched any important part, and, after an examination, El Alacran assured him that two days' rest would make him as good as new.

Edgar was anxious to see Luisa again, but the robber chief, with a show of friendliness which was undoubtedly genuine, declared that no harm would come of delay; that the mad girl was being kindly treated by Villena, and that, at times, her actions were those of a pleased child; and that, perhaps, he would be able to aid him soon.

The advice to discontinue the attempt was not repeated, and the American began to feel a real friendship for this frank, kindly bandit.

The two men breakfasted alone, Lady Jaguar remaining invisible, and, afterward, Edgar was shown about the outlaws' quarters, inside and out.

Their cave, if so it may be called, was built under a rocky ridge which ran for half a mile through the chaparral. As there were mountains on the western side of the wood, the ridge may be called their foot, though separated by a mile or more of level land, and there was nothing strange in its presence.

The cave was of their own manufacture, though they had made use of various fissures which, at the beginning, had cut the heart of the rocks. Other bowlders had been wheeled into line and, by the help of cement, half a dozen rooms had been made and then skillfully covered over.

So, there it was, in the heart of the chaparral, that the robbers had their refuge, a band which could not have flourished a month in Edgar Lewis's own country, but, in indolent, sleepy Mexico, was almost as safe from harm as the *hacenderos* who lived around the tangled wood.

All this was strange to the American, but he had heard of such things before, and he called himself lucky to possess El Alacran's favor, and did not seek to learn more than was freely told.

He wondered a good deal about the mystery which surrounded El Alacran and Lady Jaguar. The former had admitted that he, too, had a work to accomplish, and Edgar felt sure he had not become an outlaw for the mere hope of plunder.

Mexico is a land of revolutions, and, with each uprising, some rich and powerful man is sure to lose his whole property, if not his life. Knowing this, he pictured El Alacran as an outlawed revolutionist, and, feeling a conviction that his cause must have been just, he hoped he might some day rise to the top.

The day passed uneventfully. At times, Edgar was alone, but the robber was usually with him, and, at tea, Lady Jaguar made her appearance. He felt a natural awkwardness about trying to draw her into conversation, especially when El Alacran was there, but what little she said was kindly and sensible, and his interest visibly increased.

That night, Alberto Pareja was away from casa Villena. If he had been there he might have seen the unwelcome guest of Don Manuel, the man who claimed to be Juan, but, luckily for the claimant, Alberto was in another part of the village.

In fact, he was of a convivial nature, and, twice a week, he was in the habit of meeting with a party of young men at a casa at the extreme southern part of the village.

Wine was freely drank at these meetings, and many of the drinkers went home in a state of intoxication, but Don Alberto had a hard head and a strong stomach, which seemed proof against all such mishaps.

Certainly he had never been more himself than when he started that night to return to Villena's, and, afterward, he was reluctant to admit that *aguardiente* was in any way responsible for what he saw.

On his way, he was obliged either to make a *detour* or pass for some distance along the bank of the river so often referred to in these pages. He always chose the latter way, but, it must be confessed, he seldom passed in the vicinity without quickening his steps. Years ago, he had one dark night been an actor in a tragedy by the river bank, and, with the superstition of his race, he never felt at ease when near the spot where he had leased his soul to an unholy master.

He was hurrying along as usual, this night, when he suddenly heard his name pronounced, seemingly from the river, and in a sepulchral tone.

"Alberto Pareja!"

The Mexican started and looked out on the water. The night was dark—so dark that he could not see if a boat was abroad, but as men did not usually boat by night near San Pedro, he concluded it was his fancy, and started on again.

"Alberto Pareja!"

Again the name, this time so distinctly he could not doubt, but in such a hollow, unnatural voice that a sneer crossed his face. Some one was trying to frighten him, some one of his late companions.

"Alberto Pareja, do you not know me?" the unseen continued.

The man was a little alarmed, despite his strong nerves, but he answered slowly:

"It may be Paulo del Aquila."

"It is not Paulo del Aquila. I am no living man, but a specter, the spirit of a man whom you murdered and threw in the river. Shall I speak the name? I was once Leon Villena!"

Pareja was visibly alarmed—not so much at the idea of a specter, for he stubbornly refused to believe that part, but, whoever the unseen was, his reference to the throwing of a man in the river was decidedly ominous.

"What fool's talk is this?" he angrily cried, trying to feel as brave as he talked.

"You do not believe me. Look, then, and you shall see!"

The voice sounded from the middle of the river, and as soon as it ceased a white light suddenly illuminated the water at that point for several feet around, and then, slowly, a human skeleton arose from the depth until it towered at full height and stood facing Pareja with bare bones and gaping mouth.

The Mexican uttered a hoarse cry and fell upon his knees. Such a sight as this he had never seen before, and he had no power to look unmoved. Yet look he must, for all the strength was gone from his limbs, and he could not have fled to save his life.

Then the fleshless jaws moved and the hollow voice again sounded:

"Do you see me now, Alberto Pareja?"

The only reply was a groan.

"Look on all that remains of Leon Villena. You helped to murder me, and afterward to throw my body in the river. Now I have come back to you, and unless you confess your crime I will advance and strangle you with my bony fingers. Confess! confess!"

The fleshless arms waved in the air, and Pareja groveled lower still in the sand, but did not speak.

"Confess that you murdered Leon Villena!" continued the voice.

Alberto caught at the proverbial straw. Even in his extreme terror he was shrewd enough to ask himself the question, if this was the spirit of Leon Villena, why should he ask him to confess? and the thought gave him sudden strength.

"Curamba!" he cried: "if you wish to do any strangling, you had better advance at once. I await you—come on!"

Scarcely had the words passed his lips before the skeleton *did* move, advancing toward him with a gliding motion and seeming to skim over the surface of the water, and all of his sudden courage as suddenly vanished.

He tried to arise and flee but his limbs refused to move; he was powerless and the thing of horror would in a moment more be at his side.

One bony arm was outstretched and, again the unearthly voice spoke:

"Confess! confess!"

Pareja crossed himself, called on the holy Virgin for protection and almost shrieked:

"Back! back!"

At that moment the skeleton touched the bank and Alberto's endurance gave way. He uttered a shriek and fell senseless to the ground.

The skeleton had paused at the water's limit, but, just then, a shout was heard from down the river and several men came rushing forward.

Instantly, the fleshless horror disappeared, seemingly in the water, and the men who came forward found only an insensible man on the ground.

"Dead, senor, dead!" exclaimed the foremost.

"He may only have fainted. Examine and see. What can have caused the mishap?"

The first man bent down and then uttered a smothered cry.

"Don Manuel," he cried, "don't you know him?"

The *hacendero*, for the new-comer was indeed he, dropped on his knees and looked at the white face on the sand.

"Madre de Dios!" he exclaimed, "it is Pareja!"

CHAPTER XXI.

VILLAINS IN COUNCIL.

DON MANUEL was astonished, but he was not a man to be long overweighted by circumstances, and, finding that Pareja did not seem to be wounded, he sharply ordered the peons to bring water from the river.

Using their hats as the only thing at hand, a generous supply was soon dashed upon the insensible man's face, but, as he did not seem to recover readily, the *hacendero* ordered him conveyed to the casa.

As he stalked along behind the men he was puzzled to account for this unexpected calamity. He was sure Pareja had merely fainted, but strong men do not faint without a reason. What was the reason in this case? Manuel had heard a shriek, as of terror, but what had caused it?

By the time the house was reached, Don Alberto was stirring, and when he was on his own couch and the peons gone, a generous quantity of brandy soon restored him to complete reason.

He looked around a little confusedly, at first, then, seeing his friend, put his hand to his head.

"What has happened?" he asked. "Ha! I remember now—I saw the—the—"

"What did you see?" asked Don Manuel, quickly.

"The skeleton!" gasped Alberto, looking wildly around the room.

The *hacendero* returned the look by one of sharp scrutiny. He had never seen him the worse for liquor, but he suspected such was now the case.

It took several minutes to get the whole story, and its conclusion left Alberto still alarmed, Villena angry and defiant.

His quick mind grasped at a solution of the mystery at once, and he connected his own visitor of the night with Pareja's fright.

When Juan left him, he had no thought of seeking instant revenge, but when the peon, sent to dog him, returned and reported him housed in the *jacale* of Roldan, disguised as a beggar, he had hastily gathered three of his men and set out on an errand which meant death to both Juan and the half-breed.

Unluckily for him, his plans had been laid out of doors and in the hearing of Lady Jaguar, who had a faculty for being around, and when he arrived at the hut it was empty.

He had continued his search for the pair, happening on Pareja as related, and at what seemed a most critical moment, and he was not long in connecting the authors of the two cases.

It would have been easy for Juan, if he knew Alberto's habit of passing along the river, to arrange the skeleton scene, and he had plenty of time to work it after leaving the Villena mansion.

Such was his course of reasoning, but Don Alberto was not so easily convinced. All had seemed supernatural to him, and, as he lay cowering on his bed, Manuel's best logic could not reassure him.

One thing, however, was certain—there was danger in store for one or both of them from the man who claimed to be Juan Villena. He

had threatened freely, and there was no doubt but that he was bold and shrewd enough to carry out any scheme he might form.

This being the case, their proper course was, of course, to remove him at once. The peon, still acting on the erroneous belief that he and the Wandering Jew were one, felt sure that he could at any time recognize him.

The connection of Roldan with the case was not surprising. When Juan was a boy of fourteen or fifteen he had been much in the society of the half-breed, who was ten years his senior, and often they had gone hunting together in the chaparral.

Now that Juan had returned it was natural he should seek his old associate, and Don Manuel swore they should die together.

These views and plans he laid before Pareja, and the latter, trying for a while to forget his fears, agreed to do what he could in the matter.

During all these ten years, two men had rested without seeing the finger of suspicion pointed at them, and they had placidly believed that with the death of Leon Villena the last obstacle to their happiness was removed, but now the long-buried crime was thrust back in their faces with startling force.

The hour was late when Don Manuel left his friend, but, outside, he found Donna Luisa awaiting him. Whatever he might have done in the past, he had of late been kind to the mad girl, and he gently reproved her for being astir so late.

"I wish to talk with you, Don Manuel," she said, and he saw that her mood was calmer and more quiet than usual.

"Won't to-morrow do, my child?" he asked.

"I am afraid I shall forget before then what I wish to say. You know my head is not always right."

"Very well; come with me."

They entered the reading-room, and he led her to a chair with formal politeness.

"I am listening," he then said, pleasantly.

She put her hand to her head with evident bewilderment.

"Where shall I begin?" she asked.

"Wherever you choose, my child."

"You remember when I was at the coast?" she abruptly said.

"Yes."

"Good. Well, Don Manuel, I never told you that, when there, I met a young man, an American, to whom I became passionately attached. I called myself Barbara, then, and he did not know I was rich, so he could have had no object in seeking me more than real affection."

"I see."

"We were together for a week, and in that time we learned to care much for each other. We walked together, boated together, and, once, he saved me from the cannibals who live near there. We were very happy, but, when Don Alberto came and took me away, we had to part."

"That was sad."

"It was, Don Manuel, and it nearly broke my heart. I left without telling him where I had gone, but, what do you suppose he did?"

"I haven't an idea."

"He searched for me until he found me here, and now he is miserable because I cannot promise to become his wife."

"Where is he now?"

"He is stopping at the village."

"Did you tell him you were to become the bride of Don Alberto?"

"I am not sure whether I did or not. I pretended to be cold and indifferent, but I cannot still the voice of my heart. And now, Don Manuel, I want to ask you if you will not give me to him instead of to Don Alberto."

She looked at the *haciendero* with the manner of a child asking for a toy, but he only stroked his beard and seemed little affected.

"What would Alberto do in such a case?"

"He could find another bride."

"What is the name of this young man?"

"Edgar— Let me see; I can't remember the rest. I call him Don Edgar."

"Are you sure he is a good man?"

"I am sure of it."

"Well, *querida mio*, we will think of it. I will see the American, and only your own happiness shall be weighed in the balance."

"A thousand thanks, Don Manuel, and may the Virgin bless you!"

She seized his hand and kissed it, and then he gently reminded her of the lateness of the

hour and succeeded in coaxing her to return to her own apartment.

Then he went to his quarters, muttering his thoughts aloud:

"What new freak is this? Is it all a creation of her disordered intellect, or is there really a stranger at San Pedro who has been playing the gallant? I have seen no Americans about here, but Alberto will know, and I will see him early in the morning. If this mad girl has found a lover he must be removed, and Luisa must be married to Pareja without delay. I wonder that he is so willing to take a mad wife, but gold is his god, even as it has been mine."

He flung himself in a chair and stared straight at the wall.

"All would be well were it not for this Juan. He has the power to ruin us, but I trust to the men I have put on his track. Once he is dead all will be well, but, until then, I am not safe. He is shrewd and must know that records of the decree of the Government in Leon Villena's case can be found at the Capital, even though I became a felon by burning the copies in the village. He must die!"

The plotter remained for some time deep in thought. Perhaps his mind went back ten years to the night when he dyed his hands with a cousin's blood, a crime which had led him on a long road of evil deeds and bade fair to cause others.

There had been no pity in his heart when he flung Leon Villena into the river, and, until this night, the deed had given him no moment of weakness; but, at last, he saw his structure of crime menaced by ruin and he was ill at ease.

And when, at last, after tossing restlessly on his couch, sleep came to his weary eyes, he muttered as only the wicked have cause to do when buried in sleep's oblivion.

CHAPTER XXII.

PEREJA SEES ANOTHER SPECTER.

DON MANUEL slept, but, had he known all that was transpiring around *casa Villena*, he would not have ventured to close his eyes that night.

Outside the *casa* all was dark and silent. At first, it seemed as though no human being was astir, for the tired peons were in their *jacales* and Edgar Lewis, safe in the outlaws' home was not yet able to resume his attempts to see Donna Luisa.

Yet, there were persons astir near the *casa*, for, just outside the walls, a man and woman stood in the shadows and waited impatiently for some event to transpire, if their actions were any criterion.

Long they had watched the signs of life in Don Manuel's apartment, but, now these had disappeared, they waited still.

Neither of the two were strangers—they were El Alacran and Lady Jaguar.

"The night grows late," said the robber-chief, with impatience.

"We cannot wait much longer," answered Lady Jaguar. "Either we must go soon or wait until another night, and this I hate to do. I am all anxiety to take the first step to avenge my wrongs, and, if all goes well, we will this night strike a blow at both Don Manuel and Pareja."

"There is danger in the attempt on Pareja," said El Alacran, looking at her keenly.

"We have spoken of this before. Do not doubt my courage; my resolution is fixed. As for the danger, have I not often met it in the past?"

"You have, indeed, poor child."

"I am burning for vengeance, yet, sometimes I grow weak at the thought of it and ask myself, Is this I? A woman should be tender and innocent, but what am I?"

"You are what fate has made you," El Alacran sadly said.

"A female outlaw, a seeker after revenge! Yonder mad girl in the *casa* thinks she has suffered wrong. So she has, but fate has mercifully deprived her of reason. What are her wrongs to mine? They are as nothing, but I live and have my reason, and Alberto Pareja shall find that I am not a creature of wax like his mad Donna Luisa!"

Her subdued passion impressed El Alacran, who had never but once before seen her in such a mood, but he would not risk the effects of further thought and he tried to calm her.

The attempt was not in vain and Lady Jaguar was soon her calm, deliberate self.

They then proceeded to the gate and sounded

for admittance, and, when the porter appeared, it was evident all had been previously arranged with him.

He barely glanced at them, bent his head low, and, without a word, the strange couple glided across the court.

They were soon in the *casa* proper, where the actions of both showed they were well acquainted with the interior. Hand in hand, without a light, they glided along the dark passages, and the inmates slept without dreaming of such ominous intruders.

When they paused it was in the reading-room, and then a light was speedily produced.

El Alacran looked warily around. They had the room to themselves, and he laid his weapons on a chair and gave the light to Lady Jaguar.

It was a strange scene for the dull, quiet old room. Both were masked, both clad in wild and unusual garbs, and if by chance a peon had arrived on the scene, he would have been filled with horror.

El Alacran wasted no time. He was before the antique piece of furniture mentioned in a previous chapter, half book-case and half a repository for curiosities; and, with almost nervous haste, he pulled open one of the drawers.

There were minor articles inside but he brushed them quickly aside, touched a secret spring and revealed a secret drawer of small size.

It was the same niche which had been found on a previous occasion by the Wandering Jew, but, like him, El Alacran only gazed on emptiness.

He did not seem surprised, but, seizing his knife, inserted the point in one side of the secret niche and the side moved backward.

What he saw there caused his eyes to glisten, and, with renewed haste, he thrust his hand into the second space and drew it forth full of jewels which sparkled in the light as only diamonds will.

"Safe! safe!" he muttered, and his hand swept the space again and again until all were removed.

A glittering heap lay beside him, the value of thousands of dollars in precious stones, and he looked at Lady Jaguar in triumph.

"They have kept well all these years. Don Manuel has searched in vain for these things, but it remained for the robber-chief to take them from their place of safety."

"Place them in the bag," was the calm reply. "They are very valuable, and will aid us in our work, while I am sure their former owners will be glad to see them taken from this degenerate Villena."

El Alacran silently produced a leathern bag and secured all inside its cover.

"It was lucky we learned of them from the old peon woman, and I wish she had lived to receive her reward. Ah! she was faithful to her old master, and what she would not tell to Don Manuel she gladly told to El Alacran."

He speedily arranged both of the secret drawers in their former condition, restored the main one to its regularity, closed it and turned away from the old book-case.

"Now for the second venture," said Lady Jaguar, whose mind was plainly not on the jewels.

"There is yet time to withdraw—"

"I will not withdraw," she interrupted.

"There is danger, I admit, but we must go on."

El Alacran said no more. They passed from the reading-room and paused at Pareja's door. A dim light burned within, and they saw the man upon his couch, sleeping, but in a restless manner.

"His cowardly heart troubles him," said Lady Jaguar. "Conscience he has none, but his heart is not brave."

"How easy it would be to kill him as he sleeps," said El Alacran, unconsciously grasping the hilt of his knife.

"And so lose our game. No, it must not be—nor are we assassins. We leave that to him and his kind."

"Right. Outlaws should not be assassins."

It was a strange doctrine for the dreaded El Alacran, but, unmasked and at his ease, he looked like anything but a murderer.

"Conceal yourself in the curtains and I will awaken him," Lady Jaguar continued.

She removed her mask, revealing a face which was young and of marvelous beauty, and with a glance to see that her companion was out of sight, advanced toward the couch.

Muttered words fell from Pareja's lips, and she paused to listen.

"I will not give her up, even though the accursed specter haunts my bridal-chamber!" he said, with his eyes still closed. "A mad wife is not much of a prize, but the gold shall be mine."

Still harder grew the face of Lady Jaguar. She knew he referred to the luckless Donna Luisa, and his unconscious words revealed the utter baseness of his heart. She would not spare him one atom of merited alarm.

She laid her hand upon his hot forehead, and spoke in a deep voice.

"Don Alberto, awake!" she said.

Promptly the eyelids raised, Pareja moaned uneasily, then rubbed his eyes and looked about the room.

Five feet away Lady Jaguar stood, with her figure drawn to its full height, her dark, accusing eyes fixed on his face, her hands crossed over her bosom.

Pareja saw, and every vestige of color left his face. His eyes dilated, his breath came thickly, and then husky words fell from his lips.

"You—you here!" he gasped.

"Ay, Don Alberto," she answered in a thrilling voice, "your victim has come back from the grave."

"Madre de Dios!"

"I have come back to my assassin," she continued, and in the dim light, the guilty wretch had no doubt but that he looked on a spirit.

He tried to raise himself from the couch to flee, but with a smothered cry he fell back like a clod on the pillow.

For the second time in his life and twice on the same night, iron-nerved Pareja had fainted.

It had scarcely happened before El Alacran hastily emerged from his cover.

"It is done," he said, "and now let us away. His cry, faint as it was, may have been heard, and discovery would be ruin. Come!"

Lady Jaguar hastily replaced her mask, and, without another glance at the insensible man, they hurried from the room and the casa.

Passing to the outer air by the same way they had entered, thanks to the friendly or money-purchased porter, they turned toward the chaparral.

"All goes well," said El Alacran. "Pareja is thoroughly alarmed, and, when we get him in the wood, we can easily make him confess."

"May the Virgin hasten the day," said Lady Jaguar. "I am tired of such unwomanly work, and I long for the time when I can throw off the yoke."

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE WANDERING JEW UNMASKED.

THE following morning Alberto Pareja did not make his appearance to join in the family meal, and Don Manuel stated, in reply to a question from Donna Luisa, that he was ill enough to keep his room.

The *haciendero*, himself, was not in his usual spirits. He ate lightly, seemed in deep thought, and, occasionally fixed his gaze on vacancy and stared for several minutes in a strange way.

In fact, he was greatly perplexed [to know what was the trouble with Alberto. Superstition is more common in Mexico than in her sister republic of the North, but Villena was quite free from it and his friend had always laughed at the idea of specters.

Now, twice in one night, Alberto had seen, or imagined he had seen, a ghost, each time of a different species, and each visitation had brought him a swoon, so that, by morning, he was weak and unmanned.

What did it mean? Had he really seen a specter, was he, too, going mad, or was some one playing tricks upon him?

Pareja, cowering in his bed, believed he had really had spirit visitors, but Villena would accept none but the last of the theories. Still, if it was the work of cunning enemies, how had they gained admission to the casa?

He questioned the porter, who swore no one had passed the gate during the night, and in no way could he arrive at a solution of the mystery.

So he remained with Alberto and gave him liquor for his nerves until he fell into a fictitious sleep, while he, himself, found the aid of *aguardiente* not to be despised.

In fact, the *haciendero* was demoralized and

angry. He had before felt his hands full, but the aid of Pareja had suddenly been taken away, rendering the situation worse, and he felt that he had more than he could properly manage.

When the forenoon was half gone, however, one of his peons came to him with good news. The Wandering Jew had been found and easily captured, and he was then confined in a *jacale* awaiting Don Manuel's pleasure.

The master of Villena promptly hastened to meet the beggar. He went resolved that the hour should be the last on earth for the prisoner, and, as he would be surrounded by ready tools, there seemed to be no hope for the man of mystery.

Reaching the hut, he saw the Wandering Jew sitting on a stool, almost hidden by his rags and profusion of hair and beard, while he leaned on his staff with apparent weakness.

Don Manuel confronted him sternly.

"Take off your disguise," he imperiously said.

"Ah! good senor, I am not disguised. I am only a poor old man, a miserable wanderer, and I have done harm to no one. Look!—Roldan, the half-blood, is my friend; if he was here he would tell you I am not a wrong-doer."

"Cease your folly. Once for all, will you take off your disguise?"

"Senor, good senor, I am not disguised—"

"Gomez, strip off his hair and beard," said the angry *haciendero*, addressing a peon.

"Wait," cried the beggar. "If I obey you, what will you then do?"

Don Manuel was growing suspicious that this was not the man he sought, and he promptly answered:

"Unless you are one certain person you shall go free."

"Off comes the disguise, then," said the Wandering Jew with equal promptness.

So saying, he stood up, cast off his *sombrero*, a wig and false beard, and stood before them a stout, overgrown, awkward young man of some twenty years.

He was not Juan Villena.

A curse fell from Don Manuel's lips.

"I have made a mistake, and you are at liberty to resume your disguise and go free. I do not want you. Tell me, however, why you go about in this way."

"Senor, I will be frank. It is my misfortune to be lazy, and the very name of work chills my young blood. So I earn my living by wandering about as a beggar, and you can see I live well."

He touched his plump cheeks and looked the picture of innocence.

"Do you know Roldan the half-breed?"

"Intimately, senor."

"Where is your home?"

"It used to be by the river bank in Panvera."

"And your name?"

"Is Felipe del Oro."

"Enough, you can go."

The youth put on his disguise, took his staff and moved away with all the appearance of old age.

Don Manuel turned to his peon.

"Where is the mistake?" he sharply asked.

"I must have followed the wrong man that night."

"And so we have wasted valuable time. Where are the rest of the searchers?"

"I do not know. They are out in three divisions, all told. Here is one, Ricardo leads a second, and Lopez the third."

"Find them at once and tell them we do not want the beggar. Begin your work anew and with zeal, for you must find your man."

"I'll do my best, senor."

Meanwhile, the Wandering Jew had disappeared from sight in the trees to the west of the *jacale*. Once beyond the view of Don Manuel's party, he straightened himself and broke into a run which quickly covered a mile of ground. Then he arrived at a *motte* and encountered Roldan, the half-breed, who was evidently waiting for him.

"What luck?" asked the latter, abruptly.

"Excellent, Roldan. I allowed myself to be captured by the peons, according to your orders, and I was stripped before Don Manuel. I told my story and he swallowed all without suspicion."

"You have done nobly, Felipe, and you shall receive your reward. Cast off your disguise at once, for the old man is waiting for it in the hut. Stay! it will be safer for you to go there, for prying eyes may be about."

They started away, and Felipe, with natural curiosity, asked for information regarding the man he had for the time impersonated.

"You shall soon know all, good Felipe, but, for now, the man prefers to remain unknown. I will say to you, however, that he has a mission of vengeance to perform. Years ago, a *hidalgo* was murdered near here, and the Wandering Jew has sworn to bring his slayers to justice. He and I, together, hold all the necessary proofs, but we are waiting to solve another mystery which relates to the first. When that is done, woe be to the murderers!"

"Mira!" suddenly cried Felipe. "Yonder goes the outlaw queen, Lady Jaguar!"

He pointed through the timber and, as Roldan looked in the same direction, he saw the strange woman riding at a gallop toward the chaparral. She was beyond their reach, but they could see the graceful form and face-mask and the spotted horse which had gained for her the name by which people knew her.

"It is a splendid steed," said Felipe, "and worth a good, round sum."

Roldan did not answer. He was looking intently at steed or rider and there was a puzzled look on his face, but, as she disappeared behind intervening timber, he suddenly aroused.

"Let us go to the hut," he said. "The old man may want his disguise."

"He will be safe in it now; your cunning trick has thrown Don Manuel off the track."

A brisk walk of ten minutes brought them to a *jacale* in the timber. All was silent about the place and the door closed, but Roldan knocked in a peculiar manner.

There was no answer, nor yet when the knock was repeated, and the half-breed tried the door and found it unfastened. His face had grown anxious and he hurriedly entered.

The hut was vacant. This much he saw at first glance, but his gaze wandered restlessly about as though seeking for an explanation of the fact.

"He has stepped out," said Felipe.

"He promised to remain here— Ha! what is this on the floor? Madre de Dios! it is blood!"

Roldan needed no analysis to tell him that. The great pool on the floor was plainly of that substance, and its size was such as to indicate that some person or thing had left enough there to end a life.

The half-blood ran about the narrow room like a bloodhound on the trail. He saw everywhere evidence of a desperate struggle, and in more than one place the walls were smeared by the red stain.

"Madre de Dios! there has been murder done here," said Roldan, who seemed almost wild from grief.

"The old man's enemies have found him after all," said Felipe, "but where is the body?"

"They have carried it away. May the curse of God blast them for the deed."

The half-breed beat his breast like one insane, while his companion looked sympathizingly on, but the mood of the former abruptly changed.

"We have come too late to save him, but not too late for revenge. I'll hunt them down; I swear it by the Virgin!"

"Perhaps he is only wounded."

"That great pool tells a different story, but we will soon know. I will show them that the despised half-breed can follow a trail like a bloodhound!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE TRAIL OF BLOOD.

ROLDAN ran through the door, seeing as he did so a broad red line where some object had been dragged without, but it abruptly ended, showing that the assassins had lifted the body.

He ground his teeth but said nothing. Heavy feet leave bent blades of grass easily distinguishable by experienced trailers, and unless care was taken to prevent it, there would be spots of blood along the way where it would naturally drop.

Closely followed by Felipe, he hastened along with his body bent low. He saw footprints, and ever and anon, drops of dark blood, proving that he was on the right trail, but after going a hundred yards they were brought to a pause by the deep water of the river.

Roldan's eyes dilated.

"They have flung the body in there," he said; "into the same river where ten years ago Don Manuel threw—"

"Stay!" said Felipe. "They may have taken it away in a boat."

But Roldan going to the water's edge saw the prints of feet, as though a man had stood there and flung from him a heavy burden, and he stared wildly at the placid river.

"The same water! the same water!" he huskily muttered.

Felipe darted back and circled around for a few moments with his gaze on the ground.

"Caramba!" he cried, "there is still hope. Look and you will find signs of another struggle. The old man was not dead, and as some one has clearly fought here, it follows that he had enough life to temporarily free himself and attack his enemies. There is more blood here, and he may have worsted them and made his escape."

Roldan aroused and, together, they looked the ground over, finding evidence of a desperate fight in which several men seemed to have participated, while the profusion of fresh blood indicated that more than one had been injured.

"He fought bravely for his life," muttered Roldan.

He was near the water's edge again, and there he found evidence that a boat had touched at the bank and taken the whole party aboard.

The first violence of the half-breed's grief was spent and he began to reason coolly. He gave his views to Felipe in this wise: The enemy had found the Wandering Jew at the *jacale* and a fight had ensued in which some one was badly hurt. It may have been the old man, but he began to hope otherwise.

Then he was taken to the river as a prisoner, but, managing to free himself, made another hard fight which, of course, went against him, and he had been taken away in the boat.

"Which way?" asked Felipe, looking first down the stream where, two miles away, *casa Villena* could be dimly seen, and then upward where the chaparral stood grimly with only half a mile of intervening space.

This was just the question Roldan wished to have answered. Water leaves no trail, and, as time was precious, he would then have given much to have the mystery solved.

His natural shrewdness showed itself after a brief reflection.

"They may have sunk the body in the water, but, if not, they have gone toward the chaparral. They would not dare go the other way in daylight, though they may hang off and turn that way after dark."

Felipe agreed with this view of the matter, and then Roldan continued:

"I am going to sift this matter to the bottom. The old man was my friend, and I'll learn his fate or die in the attempt. That much is sworn to, and now, Felipe, I would like you to help me. You are strong and brave, a good trailer, and I may see warm work before I get through."

"Caramba! I am glad to join you. We have hunted tigers together in the chaparrals, and I am not reluctant to try with you against human game."

"Let us lose no time then. Do you go up the river on this side and watch for signs, and I'll swim across and take the other."

Roldan plunged in without removing any of his garments, crossed the stream, and then the two started together.

Despite their minute scrutiny, their progress was quite rapid and they were soon nearing the point where the chaparral, for a hundred yards bordered the river, the latter afterward curving toward the north.

The half-breed felt sure some sign would be found along this hundred-yards belt, and that he was right was soon evidenced by the signal which brought Felipe over to join him.

"What have you found?" was the eager inquiry.

"The landing-place of the murderers, their boat and their subsequent trail. Look!"

Roldan lifted the branches which hung over the water and revealed a boat hidden under the bank. There were blood-stains on its bottom, but there were also pieces of cloth which might have been fragments left after making a bandage.

"They wished to save his life," he added.

"Probably Don Manuel ordered him taken

alive and they were alarmed at what they had done."

"Very likely."

"The trail leads straight into the wood and is not much over an hour old. We will follow, but extreme caution is necessary. They number five or six men and we are only two."

"Lead on."

Neither of the men felt any timidity. They were well-armed, and, as *tigres*, had an enviable reputation for bravery. Roldan was one of the hardest fighters near San Pedro, while his ally was anything but the indolent, weak-minded youth he had seemed when with Don Manuel.

Roldan's Indian blood showed itself as soon as they started and his manner was as sagacious as that of a Comanche or Lipan. The dim trail was to him an open book and scarcely a leaf rustled as he glided along the open way, but, as the chaparral grew thicker, he handled every obstacle carefully and well and they went on without delay.

He soon saw that the pursued were well acquainted with the wood, and, as they went straight forward, he expressed the belief that they were heading for some *jacale*.

"One thing is sure, if they go on for any great distance they are going to run right into the den of El Alacran. I know this place better than any man outside of the band, I knew it before El Alacran took up his residence; and I tell you this gang may yet run their own heads into trouble."

The way became denser, obliging them to guard against contact with the cactus and mesquit bushes, but they gave them little heed and pressed on steadily.

Roldan suddenly paused.

"What now?" asked Felipe, who was in the rear.

"The trail of a horse joined that of the men and continues along with it."

"Maybe it is Don Manuel."

"Caramba! I know that track; I've seen it too many times to doubt."

"Well?"

"It was made by the spotted horse of Lady Jaguar. You remember she was riding this way when we saw her."

"She will see them then—or is she ahead?"

"The horse tracks are on top the men's. Lady Jaguar rode after them," said Roldan, chuckling. "Look you, Felipe, I'll wager something she makes it warm for them. She won't permit such intruders on her domain. I wish I could see her."

"Sancta Maria! I have no such wish."

"I'd rather see her than any living person except the old man. I suspect she can tell me one thing I want to know, but never mind."

The closing words plainly told that the half-breed had no desire to state what he desired to ask of the robber queen and Felipe did not ask.

Every moment took the trailers further into the territory of El Alacran, and an idea began to work in the younger man's mind.

"I suspect these kidnappers are members of the robber gang, for they are going toward the interior of the chaparral as straight as an arrow. Don't you suppose Don Manuel has enlisted El Alacran in his war on the Wandering Jew?"

"No," said Roldan, promptly. "If matters are as I suspect, the robbers are his deadly foes."

"Why do you think so?"

"I'll tell you some time, Felipe, but, let that be as it may, we are almost near where the band must have their quarters."

Felipe looked doubtful and ill at ease, but the extreme caution of the half-breed reassured him in a measure. Every movement of advance was made as only one bred to the chaparral can move and it was not likely they would run into any ambush.

Roldan remembered that Edgar Lewis was, or had been, in El Alacran's lair, and he would have given much at that moment to have seen the American.

They suddenly passed from the level space to where a ridge cut the wood, being less heavily timbered than the surrounding chaparral, and the half-breed paused where the bushes were thick and looked keenly about.

Somewhere along this ridge he suspected the robbers had their refuge, and, as the trail led straight toward it, he deemed it prudent to reconnoiter before venturing further.

The ridge, however, seemed silent and deserted and no human being was in sight.

CHAPTER XXV.

AN ABDUCTION PLANNED.

TIME had passed somewhat uneventfully with Edgar Lewis in the robbers' quarters. He had been allowed the fullest freedom, though warned not to be abroad too much in the chaparral, and as he had relied on El Alacran's assurance that delay would make no difference with his prospects with Donna Luisa, he had forced himself into a composure which had a very beneficial effect on his bodily condition.

His wound was doing finely, his strength seemed as great as ever, and the chief assured him that no ill effects were to be expected if he used proper care.

Both El Alacran and Lady Jaguar seemed to be absent most of the time, but, when with him, they were so kind and attentive that his liking hourly increased.

No further attempt had been made to persuade him to abandon his efforts in regard to Donna Luisa. Indeed, El Alacran sometimes spoke hopefully in regard to the matter, saying that, perhaps, her madness would not be lasting.

Lady Jaguar seemed disinclined to speak of the maiden, and, as he had not forgotten that she had once hinted at imperfections in his idol, he could not but feel that she had little love for her.

The female outlaw, however, was a mystery to Edgar. His nature was naturally suspicious, and, after a time, he began to believe that many of her ways were assumed rather than natural. Her cold, masculine way of speaking was not common to Mexican women, who are light-hearted, warm-natured as silvery voiced, and she was a perpetual riddle.

Nine men out of ten would easily have solved the mystery and named it in one word—jealousy. The average man, full of vanity, would have suspected at once that Lady Jaguar was not less warm-hearted and impassionable than the Barbara of the coast romance, and, looking on the handsome face and form of the American, had herself conceived a passion for him.

This much arrived at, it was easy to see the rest. Lady Jaguar was not bad-hearted, and she would not commit a crime to secure her end, but, seeing Edgar passionately attached to a rival, it was natural she should secretly hate her and allow her own actions to be governed by that frame of mind.

Edgar Lewis, however, was free from the predominating vanity of his sex in this particular, and, never suspecting all this, he gained no clew to his riddle. Perhaps it was well he did not, for, knowing the revengefulness of Spanish nature, he might have guessed that the romance would end in a red drama, and that both male and female outlaws were playing him false.

At a late hour of the same afternoon on which we have followed Roldan to the chaparral, El Alacran came to Edgar as he sat alone in the little room devoted to his use.

He greeted him kindly, and then sat down and calmly lighted a cigar.

"Do you feel well enough for active service to night?" he abruptly but quietly asked.

"Yes," was the quick reply.

"Well, I promised you that I would try to study out some way for helping you, and I think I have the plan perfected. I have been very busy of late, which accounts for my almost constant absence, but there is a breathing-spell now."

"Which you offer to destroy for my sake. I am afraid I am asking too much—"

"Don't mention it, *amigo mio*, but hear my plan. It, of course, refers to Donna Luisa."

"Go on."

"Well, I have decided that the only way for you to accomplish anything is to get the mad girl away from the Villena hacienda."

"Precisely my idea."

"While she remains there, she will continue to be mad, but, once beyond the sight of Don Manuel and Pareja, where she could be quiet and have proper care, the demon of madness might be conquered and the Barbara of other days be restored to you."

"I hope it will be so."

"I am not sure she will go with you, however."

"Why not?"

"Since her reason became clouded, she feels no ill-will toward Villena. He is kind to her, and she does not see that it is only a part of his plot."

Edgar did not answer. He was not himself

sure that Donna Luisa would flee with him. Since he had come to San Pedro, she had never complained of her situation, while she had always denied a knowledge of the coast romance. In such a case, could she be prevailed upon to leave the *casa*?"

"What shall I do if she will not go?" he asked, after a pause.

"I can see but one way."

"And that?"

"Is to abduct her."

"Abduct her?" repeated Edgar, blankly.

"Yes, señor."

"The idea is madness."

"Why so?"

"Perhaps I should say it is repugnant to my feelings. I do not seek an unwilling wife."

"That is not the idea. You have your choice between two courses—to let her remain where she is, with her reason forever clouded, or to take her away, with or without her consent, and trust to new associations to restore to you your Barbara."

Edgar stared at the robber in a helpless way. The idea of abducting the girl was one which went against all the instincts of his manhood, but was there not reason in what he said?

El Alacran was watching him calmly and keenly, and he saw a look of fixed resolution creep over his face.

"Chief," he said, "I have been in the dark long enough. Now, I want light. You know what has been the trouble of Donna Luisa's life, but you have refused to tell me. You also say that, even if her reason was restored, there would still be an unsurmountable barrier between us two. Now, as my right, I ask you to explain these riddles. Until you do so, I can make no move, for why should I abduct her if she can in no way be saved to me?"

The robber heard him through without a change of his firm face.

"I suppose there is no more than justice in what you ask, and all that I can honorably tell I will now explain. Donna Luisa was left an orphan when eight years old. Her father, Leon Villena, was arrested for treason and imprisoned in the ruined fort of San Pedro—then a tolerably strong building—but the charge was a false one, gotten up by his cousin, Manuel, and Alberto Pareja, for the purpose of gaining the Villena wealth."

"Their charge had been secretly made, and they dared not let the case come to trial, so one dark night, accompanied by Roldan, the half-breed, they went to the fort and succeeded in getting the prisoner out. He trusted them, and thought he was going to freedom, but, once outside, the three assassins set upon him, tied his hands and feet, and flung him in the river."

"The search which followed was of course vain, and the Government seized his property. He had a younger brother, Juan, who had for some time been absent, and of whom nothing was known, and it was the decree of the authorities that if he did not return in eleven years, all should go to Luisa, her mother having died of a broken heart soon after Leon's tragic death."

"Now, you see the plot of Manuel. He was made Luisa's guardian, and it became his pet idea to marry her to Alberto Pareja, from which scheme has come all their persecution of her."

"And for that they have driven her mad?"

"Their devilish cruelty was enough to madden any one. When you saw her on the coast she had fled from them, hoping to remain undiscovered, but they found her, as you know."

"If she had told me her trouble I would have defended her against them all."

"It would have been wiser. Now, as to the obstacle between you two, I have given my word of honor not to mention it at present, but events are working in such a manner that I believe the next week will forever remove that obstacle."

"Can I do nothing to aid in its removal?"

"Rest easy on that point, Don Edgar; the work is in the hands of one who is fully equal to the emergency. When the lightning strikes, more than one wrong will be avenged."

"And how does it happen that you are so well informed about all these matters?"

El Alacran smiled slightly.

"Some of those who seek retribution have been to me for aid, and I shall do all I can."

"Well, I see nothing unfair in your proposition and I agree to it. To-night, you say, we shall go to Donna Luisa. What is your plan?"

"Simply for you and I to go to the *casa*

with half a dozen of my men. You shall urge the mad girl to flee with you, and, if she refuses, she must then be taken by force."

"And brought here?"

"Yes."

"Will she not be found?"

"They are not shrewd enough to do it."

"So be it, then."

Some further time was spent in elaborating their plans, though El Alacran had all well arranged, and the pulse of Edgar Lewis began to quicken at thought of the work on hand. Was it well, or the reverse, that he was trusting El Alacran so implicitly?

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE MIDNIGHT VENTURE.

EL ALACRAN left his guest and went outside the room where he met Lady Jaguar.

"Well?" she said, inquiringly.

"All is well, *querido mio*," he answered, taking her hands in his.

"The mad girl is to be abducted?"

"Yes."

"Did he object to the plan?"

"He did at first, but I laid it before him in the most favorable light and won the day. He does not suspect that I am deceiving him, and I trust we shall be able to coax her away from the *casa*."

"And then, what?"

"She must, of course, be gotten out of the way, and I think some asylum can be found where she will be well treated. If we succeed in removing her from our path, there is no reason why we should follow her with revenge. She has suffered wrong and is deserving of pity, but she must not stand in our way."

"I admire you for your humanity," Lady Jaguar said, earnestly. "Standing in the way of our success as she does, there are many men who would give her no more mercy than the point of a knife."

"I am not an assassin, but to-night the girl must be forever removed from our path. We will take her here for the time, and, afterward, smuggle her away, but her disappearance must be as complete and permanent as was that of Leon Villena, ten years ago."

Lady Jaguar shuddered.

"There is nothing but blood in our lives," she said.

"Be of good cheer, my child. When this mad Donna Luisa is removed, there will be no one between you and the American, and when you have once won his affection—not a very hard task if I am any judge of your powers of fascination—a future of peace and happiness will lie before you."

"I am not so sure he will wed a female outlaw."

"Now, you cast a slur on my own trade. By St. Catherine; I will not allow that; but, a truce to idle talk. I must at once make preparations for the night's work, and do you in the meanwhile watch over our flock. *Adios!*"

El Alacran hastened away and spoke with half a dozen of his most trusty men. He had only to say that they were wanted and they went without question to get ready for work.

Lady Jaguar came to Edgar as he sat in the common apartment impatiently waiting for the hour of action to come.

"You are going to your Barbara, Don Edgar," she said, more softly than usual.

"Yes, Lady Jaguar. Have I your good wishes?"

"The very best."

"I am going to ask a favor of you before I go."

"Ah!"

"It is that you will remove your mask. Why do you preserve all this mystery with me? Do you fear to trust me?"

"No, Don Edgar; I believe you worthy of my fullest confidence, but, as the outlaw queen, I am always in mask. Very soon, however, I hope to throw off the mask and this life at one and the same time, and then no one will know I was Lady Jaguar. I am not afraid to trust you, but I must ask further indulgence in a woman's whim."

"I am sure the masked face is both young and beautiful," he gallantly said.

"Ah! what if Barbara should hear this flattery? You must not forget her, Don Edgar."

El Alacran entered at that moment and interrupted the conversation, but, afterward, when in his own den and engaged in reloading his revolvers, the American candidly asked

himself the question, was his interest in Barbara waning?

At times he had seen the glorious eyes of Lady Jaguar grow far more womanly than her speech when with him, and at all times she thrilled and interested him. The mystery hanging about her also had its effect, and, now and then, he caught himself almost wishing this chaparral life must not end—almost wishing he might take a place in the band and in Lady Jaguar's heart and be a robber wild and free.

Then a recollection of Barbara and his proud family name and honor came to wither the idea at a breath—a Lewis could not become an outlaw, nor was fickleness a trait of the family.

But, really, looked at from a matter-of-fact standpoint, was the robber queen not preferable to the mad girl of *casa Villena*? Since his coming to San Pedro, Edgar had seen the latter only by night, but it seemed as though her beauty had faded, and it was certain that intelligence of look and manner had vanished before the demon of madness.

Was it well, or otherwise, for him to cling to this phantom of the past?

He started angrily as he realized how his thoughts were drifting.

"I am becoming contemptible. Whatever Lady Jaguar may or may not be, she will never be more to me than what she is to-day. If I cannot possess Barbara, in her right mind, I'll turn my back on Mexico and end my life in wandering."

He turned to leave the room and join El Alacran, but paused, and then stepped back as he saw the chief speaking with a subordinate.

"Let the wounded man have every care and attention, and to-morrow I will see him," El Alacran was saying. "As for the other man, look to him sharply and see he does not escape. He is a valuable prisoner and keen as a mesquite thorn. I hold you responsible for his safe-keeping."

"I will hold him fast, *capitano*."

The voices ceased, and Edgar, starting forward again after a pause, found the chief alone. The latter looked at him keenly, as though suspicious he had been listening, but nothing was to be read in that calm face.

Night had fallen, but, as their work was one to be done at a late hour, some time was spent by the chief, Lady Jaguar and their guest in the common apartment before starting.

Edgar was somewhat nervous, the Queen silent and thoughtful, and El Alacran, who seemed proof against every emotion, had most of the talking to do.

The American wondered what new inmates had been added to the occupants of the cave—those to whom the chief had referred in speaking with his subordinate—but no explanation was offered and he asked no questions. What he had heard, however, could not but show him that, though his pleasant intercourse with El Alacran had blinded him to his faults, he was an outlaw still.

The starting hour at last arrived, and the two men, accompanied by five stout robbers, left the rock refuge. Lady Jaguar bade them good-by at the entrance, and the look in her eyes haunted Edgar for some time.

A little before he had thought her indifferent to the success of their enterprise, but that look seemed like a prayer for their safety—or was it all for El Alacran?

They went on in a way well known to the robbers, but which was all labyrinth to the American, and, in due time, reached the open field.

After that it was not far to the *hacienda*, and Edgar's pulse began to quicken as he saw the walls which guarded the abiding-place of Donna Luisa.

El Alacran had already informed the porter of the proposed visit, so he went unhesitatingly to the gate and gave the usual signal. It was promptly opened, and, as the man stepped back, the uninvited callers entered and the way was closed.

"Is all well, Benito?" the chief asked.

"Yes, señor. Every one has retired, and the *casa* is dark," the peon answered.

"Let us go on, then. Watch for our return, and, if any of your companions happen around, send them away."

"I will do so, señor."

They crossed the court and paused at the main entrance. There the five men were left, and El Alacran and Edgar went on alone.

The latter, of course, knew nothing of the way, and they went hand in hand so that he might not stumble over anything and cause an

alarm. It was the first time in his life he had played so burglarious a part, but it was not a moment for sentimentality and his mind was more on things of fact than theory.

They reached the door of Donna Luisa's room and there the first real difficulty occurred. It was a somewhat delicate matter to invade a lady's chamber at midnight, but, as there was no alternative, Edgar was prepared to make the attempt.

He was to enter, awaken her, quiet whatever alarm she might feel and then retire until she was prepared to receive him—a very elaborate plan, but one which had a serious stumbling-block as a possibility.

When awakened, she would, of course, be alarmed, and it was so very likely that she might give utterance to a few feminine shrieks that he felt almost like giving up in despair.

El Alacran had brought a sort of dark lantern, and he put this in the American's hand and gently pushed him inside the apartment.

Then Edgar paused in irresolution and looked about by the dim light.

He saw a small apartment, filled with such finery and curiosities as usually mark the sleeping-room of Spanish ladies of refinement, and at one side was a couch.

A neat and tasteful affair it was, with its show of wealth, but it was undisturbed—Donna Luisa was not there.

CHAPTER XXVII. THE RESULT.

DON MANUEL VILLENA was naturally a shrewd and suspicious man, and to these traits years of experience and self-plotting had added a remarkable keenness which had before the date of our story saved him from many a life-shoal and quicksand.

Consequently, he had not failed to see all the stray threads of the web of fate menacing him, and out of them he had woven a plausible theory.

In the first place, Juan Villena was at or near San Pedro, bent on obtaining his rights. He had demanded them, and he was not a man to give up a fixed purpose.

When Alberto Pareja saw the specter of Leon Villena at the river, and, afterward, that other specter in his room, Don Manuel was not slow to connect Juan with their authorship.

For some reason or other, the heir desired to alarm Pareja as a part of his plot to gain possession of the family wealth—hence, the specters. Just what was his idea in this, the *haciendero* could not see, but he shrewdly suspected a confession on Alberto's part was desired.

Granting that the *casa* specter was a cunning trick, inspired by Juan, it followed that Juan had in some way gained access to the house, and that he had come by any way except the gate was not probable.

He questioned the porter, who swore that no one had passed during his watch, but Don Manuel was not convinced. Benito was an old family servant, and what was more natural than that he should have gone over to the legal heir?

The wily *haciendero* did not let him see he was suspected, but, selecting four of his most trusty peons, gave them orders to hover about the house and court every night until further notice and watch both for intruders and for treachery on the part of Benito.

His precaution was speedily rewarded and to the sorrow of the midnight intruders.

Edgar was still glancing about Donna Luisa's apartment, surprised that she was not there, when a sudden tumult in the lower part of the *casa* startled him.

The tumult was made up of shouts and oaths, and, in a moment more, the clash of steel was added.

El Alacran dashed headlong into the apartment. His manner had undergone a great change. He did not show signs of alarm, but his powerful face was full of fire and his form seemed to have expanded until he was like a gladiator.

"Where is the girl?" he demanded, glancing about the room.

"She is not here. What are those sounds—"

"Curse them! they have taken her away, at least from this room, for I believe she is in the *casa*."

"We are discovered."

"I should say so, and our men need our aid. This way, Lewis, and we'll show these dogs how men fight. We must conquer the whole household or die at their hands!"

Before leaving the chaparral, the chief had given Edgar a sword, and, with a sudden battle fever, he plucked it from its scabbard. He was no novice with the weapon, having received lessons in two hemispheres, and for the first time he felt a thirst for human blood.

"Come, or there will be no one for us to assist!" said El Alacran, grimly, as he snatched the lantern from the American's hand.

As they emerged from the room they saw there was no occasion for the puny light. The broad stairway was already illuminated, and at its foot they saw their followers battling against odds with the peons of Don Manuel, headed by the *haciendero* in person.

Pareja was not visible.

"Dash out the lights and escape," suggested Edgar.

"No, by St. Catherine, I will conquer the whole household or die in my tracks. Come on!"

The robber bounded down the stairway closely followed by his ally.

The latter saw that the peons had two men to their one, but the outlaws were fighting with the skill and coolness of trained soldiers and, as yet, no one had fallen.

The rescuers plunged headlong into the fray. Edgar's first act was to save a robber's head from a vicious sword-blow of a peon, and then the man turned furiously upon him, wielding his weapon with remarkable effect.

Edgar retreated for a few paces until clear of the other combatants and then coolly stood at bay and met stroke after stroke with a veteran's skill.

"*Carajo!*" hissed the peon, "I am going to have your life, you accursed American. Do you know me? I am Ricardo, the bull-fighter, and I sacrifice a man to my patron saint every day."

"A capital idea!" cried Edgar, losing his usual cool self, in the excitement of battle. "I am with you in the fashion, and I'll begin by carving you. Why don't you fight, Ricardo?"

"*Mil demonios!* I will tear out your heart!" howled the bull-fighter.

"Not if I know it; this is not an affair of the heart."

Their words were brave, but, to tell the truth, each was beginning to find he had met his equal. Ricardo was a veteran of the American-Mexican war and a professional bull-fighter, but all his prowess failed to break the guard of the slender American, while the latter met with a course of assault he could neither understand nor scorn.

He found time, however, to glance at the other contestants and saw that the robbers were evidently getting the best of it. Three of the peons had fallen, while, apart from the rest, Don Manuel was put to his uttermost to ward off the lunges of El Alacran.

Edgar began to tire of the contest and put forth all his power. His wrist moved easily and his passes were so rapid that Ricardo grew bewildered and finally gave ground. The American followed, forcing the fighting, and every moment growing more confident.

"Throw down your weapon, Ricardo, or I'll run you through!" he cried.

"Never!" hissed the bull-fighter, who was fighting with the hope of exhausting his slighter adversary.

"Then take the consequences."

Thrust—parry—thrust—parry; then a feint, an awkward parry on Ricardo's part; then Edgar's steel darted straight into the massive body.

The bull-fighter threw up his arms, dropped his sword, staggered and fell with a crash, wounded past mischief.

"*Carajo!* I am done for," he gasped, "but may the fiends get you for the stroke."

Edgar turned to the other fighters. He saw Don Manuel on his knees with El Alacran's sword at his throat, while the surviving peons had flung down their weapons in abject surrender.

"Bind them all," said the robber-chief; an order which was promptly obeyed, Don Manuel being the last to feel the cords.

"The *casa* is ours," continued El Alacran, tersely. "Stay here, braves, and guard the prisoners. Don Edgar, follow me."

The speaker bounded up the stairway, followed by the American. He knew there was danger in delay, but they had come to secure Donna Luisa and the deed must be done.

He believed he knew where to look for her and darted unceremoniously into a remote

room. There was light within, and the first glance revealed Alberto Pareja standing at bay, weapon in hand, just in front of the mad girl.

The cavalier's face was pale, but he had evidently made up his mind to sell his life dearly, for his greeting came in the shape of a pistol-ball which passed between the body and arm of El Alacran.

The deed was hardly done before the robber sprung forward and at the first pass sheathed his sword in Pareja's body. A double fall followed and the wounded man and Donna Luisa lay still and silent together.

"*Madre de Dios!* I have killed him and I did not intend it!" El Alacran exclaimed.

Edgar sprung forward and lifted Donna Luisa in his arms. He knew she had only swooned from excitement and alarm, but his heart bled anew for her and he passionately kissed her pale face.

El Alacran turned Pareja upon his back, and the man glared at him with wild and fast-glazing eyes. The shadow of speedy dissolution was there, and his slayer, who had spoken truly when he said he had not intended to kill him, was filled with consternation though not with pity.

"Let me alone!" the dying villain gasped.

"Alberto Pareja, you are dying, but before you go confess that you murdered Leon Villena and—"

He paused as a hollow rattle sounded in the man's throat, and then, with a tremor, he was gone forever from the world.

El Alacran was staring at him blankly when a robber rushed into the room excitedly.

"Quick, senor captain!" he cried. "Soldiers are coming toward the *casa* and we have barely time to escape."

The words aroused the chief and made him again himself. He caught Donna Luisa in his strong arms and darted toward the door.

"Follow me!" he said, tersely. "We must reach the chaparral or we are ruined. Leave all the prisoners except Don Manuel and the girl. They must go with us. Hasten, or we are doomed!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE END OF THE TRAIL.

WE left Roldan, the half-breed, at the end of a previous chapter just as he and Felipe had arrived at the ridge in the chaparral, a place which he deemed it prudent to reconnoiter before going further.

For some time past he had had a very clear idea of the location of El Alacran's den. He knew that one part of the ridge had suddenly undergone a metamorphosis, and though this might be due to an earthquake, he was not inclined to take that view.

When the feeble attempts had been made to hunt down the robbers, no one had sought his advice, and as he had no enmity toward the band he had never cared to make trouble for them.

"Use your eyes well, Felipe," he said, "for I believe we are near the end of the trail. If such is the case, Don Manuel has obtained the aid of the outlaws, and such being the case, it behooves us to be cautious."

Even as he spoke, something of a noose-like form suddenly dropped over his head, he was lifted from his feet by an unseen power, and then he was dangling in space, hung by the neck.

It needed no reflection to tell him he was in a trap, and throwing up his hands, he grasped at what suspended him and found it a lasso.

Instantly, however, he was dropped roughly to the ground, and before he could arise, three or four men pounced upon him and he was bound hand and foot in spite of his struggles.

He looked up in impotent rage and saw several dashing-looking fellows standing over him, while Felipe lay not far away in the same predicament as himself.

"Ha! ha!" laughed one of the captors; "it is not so very hard to capture Roldan, the trailer."

"*Mil demonios!*" hissed the half-breed, "you dare not give Roldan a chance for his life."

"Why should we? This is a game of wits, not of muscles. Aha! Roldan, you must grow wiser before you try to beat the king of the chaparral."

"Where is El Alacran?"

"You will see him soon enough, *muchacho*."

"Have I done him an injury?"

"He will tell you that himself."

"Did he tell you to seize me?"

"No."

"Then why was it done?"

"If you had not followed us through the wood, you would not have been in trouble."

"Then it was you who assaulted the old man in the hut?" cried Roldan, quickly.

"*Caramba!* you leap to conclusions. Say no more now; El Alacran will hear the rest. Comrades, carry the prisoners to their quarters. Stay! bind their eyes before they go."

Roldan grated his teeth in helpless fury. A scarf was bound over his eyes, he was raised in the arms of his captors, and then, for five minutes, was borne about where the bushes constantly flapped in his face.

In spite of this he was not deceived. He was shrewd and experienced, and, suspecting he was being carried about in a circle, he did not believe they were many yards from where he had been captured, when a sudden change of air showed that they had entered a subterranean passage.

His captors went on for some time, and then paused and laid him down. The scarf was taken from his eyes, and he saw he was in a little room about ten feet square.

At first glance it seemed all of stone, and as the only furniture was a stool and a bed of tiger-skins, it was plain to see it was a dungeon.

Felipe was not visible.

"Here you are," said one of the robbers, cheerfully.

"Where am I?" was the quick response.

"*Caramba!* I should not think you would find it hard to locate yourself in so small a room. Here we will leave you, Roldan. *Adios.*"

"Hold!" cried the half-breed.

"Well?"

"I want to know why I am thus treated."

"You shall learn anon. Our work was to place you here, and it is done. *Adios.*"

"Hold!" cried Roldan, again.

"Well?"

"Will you not unbind me?"

"Impossible, senor; that is for our leader to do. Pray do not cry 'Hold!' again. We will leave you, Roldan. *Adios!*"

All the men had departed excepting the speaker, and he speedily followed. Then the narrow doorway, if such it might be called, was darkened by some sort of door, the robbers fumbled for a little while on the outside, and Roldan was alone, a prisoner.

He sat upright and looked about his narrow quarters. A wax-candle burned in a niche at one corner, but it showed nothing of promise.

The half-breed saw he was in a secure dungeon. The sides were of large boulders, cemented together, while roof and floor were of solid rock. And this narrow den had no articles whatever excepting the couch, the stool and the candle.

The outlook was not pleasant.

He gained his feet with an effort, only to lose his balance and fall on the tiger skins, so he rolled toward the entrance and examined the door. It was of saplings, crossed one upon another, and forming a solid whole, while through the tiny crevices he could distinguish bars on the outside.

Further examination was impossible, his hands being bound behind his back, so he rolled again to his couch and sat down to ruminate.

He was not one to tamely give up hope, and, strong as his bonds seemed, he was resolved to give them a trial before calling the battle lost. He had before then escaped from just such dilemmas, and, once unbound, there would be a spark of hope.

"I wonder where Felipe is?" he thought. "I'll call his name anon and see if he will answer." Of course he and the Wandering Jew are both in the cave. Well, we must all escape, and we are going to do it unless the old man is too badly hurt to travel. *Caramba!* it galls me to have run into this trap."

He gave his bonds a vicious wrench but they held firm.

"The old man must be saved!" he muttered.

If the robbers had known the exact facts of the case, perhaps they might not have left Roldan alone in his prison with no one to watch him. He was not a person to despise, as an enemy, at any time, while, with his mysterious interest in the Wandering Jew to urge him on, it would be a stout cell that would hold him.

Still, the outlook was not promising. His hands and feet were seemingly securely bound, and, even had they been free, the stout door,

doubly barred, would confront him and he without a weapon to work upon it.

The fact that he was bound gave him little trouble, for, as we have before said, he had often freed himself from such incumbrances. His wrists were large and muscular and his hands small, and, when the proper time came, he had little doubt of his ability to cast off the thongs.

He was in no haste to do this, for it would not be safe to work until dark, but he wanted to know if Felipe was near.

So he rolled again to the door and pronounced the name of his ally several times, but without getting any reply.

He returned to the couch, growling discontentedly.

"Why didn't I tell these ruffians that I wanted to see Lady Jaguar?" he muttered. "If I thought I could raise any of them, I'd yell like a hungry tiger."

He did not try the experiment, but, at the end of an hour, a robber appeared and looked in upon him, whereupon he made an earnest request to see the female outlaw, only to be mocked and tantalized until he flew into a passion.

The man went away, followed by the curses of Roldan, who then began to wrench madly at his bonds.

"If I get clear, I'll bring the soldiers down on these scoundrels and exterminate the whole gang!" he snarled, furiously.

The first step toward escape was taken when he succeeded in freeing his hands, and then the thongs on his ankles were soon removed.

He went to the door and shook it savagely, but the action only proved its security. Simple as was its form of manufacture, it was like a rock in his way.

Then he wandered morosely about the narrow den. There was not a thing there to help him. Even the little stool was useless, for there was not a crevice in the door large enough to insert a leg of the stool to pry away the bars.

The cement between the boulders was closely examined, but all was firm and secure. Roldan was like a rat in a trap.

The hours passed away slowly. He had returned to his couch, where he lay curled up like a sleeping beast, but he was wide awake. He had about given up all hope of escape, but, if the robbers came to give him food, he was resolved to attack them.

"If only I could see Lady Jaguar!" he said, to himself, for the hundredth time. "Maybe there is no hope there, but I want to try. Ten minutes with her would settle this question one way or the other."

CHAPTER XXIX.

A TURN IN THE TIDE.

ROLDAN had fallen into a light slumber when he was awakened by what seemed like the speaking of his name. He opened his eyes indolently, believing it the fancy of a dream, but the repetition of the word brought him to his feet like a flash.

"Roldan!"

"Here!" cried the half-breed, quickly, hastening to the door.

The voice had sounded like that of Felipe, but he could not believe it a fact.

"Are you alone?"

"*Caramba!* I should say I am. Is that you, Felipe?"

"Hush! not so loud," returned the voice of his ally.

"*Santa Maria!*" ejaculated the half-breed, "it can't be you are there unguarded by outlaws."

There was no answer, but he heard some one removing the bars, and, through a crevice, saw the face of Felipe.

His blood bounded with sudden hope. It looked very much as though his ally was at liberty, but such a thing seemed impossible.

The truth was revealed to him when the door was set aside and, looking out, he saw only Felipe. He caught the man's hands in his and seemed on the point of initiating an impromptu *fandango*, but his friend promptly stopped him.

"Be silent as the grave. I have escaped, but the robbers are all around us."

"How did you get free?"

"One of the gang proved to be an old friend of mine. He came and cut my bonds, but he has gone away and left us to shift for ourselves."

"Is the old man here?"

"So he said, and his dungeon is beyond this."

"Then he is alive?"

"Yes, and not badly wounded. Jose says he can travel all right."

"Praise the Virgin! Have you weapons—Ah, yes, I see you have, and a plenty of them."

Felipe had pointed to one side where two carbines and a pair of long, double-edged knives lay by the wall.

"We have no time to lose," said the rescuer. "El Alacran is away from the cave and we shall not be molested before morning, but we are liable to run against some of the band."

"Where is Lady Jaguar?"

"I don't know."

"I would like to see her."

"It is impossible; let us go at once. The old man is in this direction, and, further on, is a rear entrance by which we must escape."

"Lead the way."

Felipe darted into the cell, secured the wax candle, and then they walked along a narrow passage. They had not gone far before they saw another barred door, and, in a short time, they had it open.

A faint light shone within and they saw another dungeon like Roldan's. A man had just arisen on his elbow on the tiger-skin couch, and the half-breed saw that he was the Wandering Jew, though, to the reader, he has undergone a metamorphosis since we last saw him.

His rags had been exchanged for a suit of Roldan's own clothing, his hair, though gray, was no longer long and wild, while his form was muscular and, evidently, little the worse for any wound received.

The half-breed ran forward, and, as the Wandering Jew recognized him, he leaped to his feet and they clasped hands warmly.

"I thought you were dead," said Roldan, his face full of happiness.

"I have received hard usage and a few slight cuts since I saw you, but my strength is still good;" and he tightly pressed the brown hand of his friend.

"Praise the Virgin!" said Roldan.

"But, my friend, how is this? How does it happen you are here?"

"We have come to rescue you and we have now only to go. Lead on, Felipe, and lose no time."

Nothing could be prompter than the way in which the younger man obeyed, and, as the others followed at his heels, Roldan whispered to the Wandering Jew,

"We still live, and Leon Villena shall be avenged."

"May the Virgin aid us in the work," was the deep reply.

Their way ended abruptly at a pile of rocks, but all this had been explained to Felipe. He laid hold of one of the boulders, rolled it aside, and a puff of fresh air came in through the aperture thus made.

They had to lay flat in order to pass through, but it was soon done, and, as Roldan arose to his feet, he saw that they were on the western side of the ridge.

It was no time for words and they promptly moved to the deeper shadows of the bushes.

Once there, the Wandering Jew proceeded to thank both of his rescuers, and then the place of leader was given to Roldan as the one who best knew the way.

He had decided that it would not be safe to return to San Pedro, since it would only result in taking the old man straight into the power of Don Manuel again, so he turned his back on the ridge and began to move away, a very difficult task because of the thickness of the bushes.

He was filled with curiosity to know how the Wandering Jew could be in so good condition after all the blood spilled at the *jacale*, and the latter briefly explained as they went.

When his two friends left him alone at the hut in order to play the trick on the *haciendero* he had for some time remained perfectly quiet; but, at last, thinking it time for them to return, he went to the door to look out.

He had hardly done this before a man glided to his side, and, suspicious of his actions, he tried to close the door in his face. The fellow, however, flung himself against it, effecting an entrance, and in a moment more the two were locked in a deadly embrace.

The old man had never before seen his adversary, but, suspecting him to be a tool of

Don Manuel, he put forth all his strength to master him. There seemed a very strong hope of success, but the fellow drew a knife and tried to stab him.

That put at rest the Wandering Jew's last scruple, and, wresting away the weapon, he plunged it into the owner's breast, ending the struggle and his life at one stroke.

He lowered the body to the floor and stood for a moment gazing upon it, but, suddenly remembering it would not do to be found with such a thing for company, he decided to convey it to the river.

This he had no trouble in doing and the water had soon borne away the body.

He washed his hands and turned to retrace his steps, only to find himself confronted by half a dozen peons who at once set upon him. He resisted desperately, but was finally beaten insensible, and only the prompt arrival of a third party saved his life.

The rescuers were of El Alacran's band—this much the old man knew, but why they interfered, or why they brought him to the cave, he could not tell, for he had not recovered consciousness until he found himself in his dungeon.

There he had received the best of care, including good surgery and strengthening wine, and he had been assured that no harm should be done him, but neither El Alacran nor Lady Jaguar had appeared.

"They may have acted only on a whim," said Roldan, "for I have known them to aid the unfortunate, but, somehow, it seems as though the hand of Lady Jaguar was in the work."

The Wandering Jew did not answer, for, at that moment, a peculiar scream sounded not far away and was answered from another point—sounds they all well knew, for they were cries from the throats of the chaparral tigers.

"That is bad," observed the old man.

"Do not worry," said Roldan. "It is not likely they will molest us, and, if they do, you know I am a tiger-hunter by trade."

The words were brave, but they were said to reassure the old man. Roldan, perhaps, felt more uneasiness than either of his companions. To quote from an authority on the subject, "It is one thing to hunt a tiger and another to be hunted by him;" and the half-breed, in spite of his trade, had no desire to meet the fierce brutes.

He knew the chaparral was full of them, and, when hungry, they would not hesitate to attack any number of men, while, as antagonists, they were terrible in the extreme.

"I wish I had a carbine," said the old man.

"We carry two, and, if it comes to a hand-to-hand fight, these knives are full of mischief."

"So, too, are the claws and jaws of the tigers," thought Felipe, but he kept his apprehensions to himself and silently followed their guide.

Meanwhile the tiger cries continued and increased in number until it appeared that they were in a very nest of them and listening to a savage concert.

Roldan shut his jaws tightly. They were in sore peril, and, as he remembered all that was at stake, it seemed as though one danger too many was forced upon them.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE MIDNIGHT FLIGHT.

EL ALACRAN was surprised, but not disheartened, by the announcement that soldiers were approaching the *casa*. He had known that a company of cavalry were near San Pedro, and, though he had not thought to see them molest him, his brave heart met the peril without wavering.

He carried the insensible girl down the stairs, closely followed by Edgar Lewis, and found his men awaiting with outward calmness. He gave a few hasty orders, and in a minute the whole party was in the court with Donna Luisa and Manuel Villena in charge.

The *haciendero* had been gagged, but he glared at El Alacran in impotent fury as they went.

As they crossed the court they saw the body of Benito, the porter, lying on the flagging, and the robber ground his teeth as he realized that Don Manuel's peons had slain him for his treachery to them.

They quickly passed through the gate, and, mounting their horses, dashed away toward the chaparral. They were in time to avoid the soldiers, but El Alacran knew they would soon

be on the track. It would have been wiser had he slain the peons they left behind, but he was not an assassin.

The spirited horses needed only the word and they swept rapidly along toward the wood. The river was reached and forded at the usual place, and very soon the dark shadows of the trees seemed stretching out their arms to welcome them.

El Alacran began to feel like laughing at the soldiers. So far, no sign of them had been seen, and, once in the chaparral there seemed little danger unless they possessed an experienced guide, which would not be probable.

That he had made a mistake in thus reasoning was quickly shown, for, suddenly, there almost robber pressed forward to announce that the soldiers were coming at full speed.

El Alacran was annoyed but not alarmed. He knew the pursuers must have been notified before their arrival at the *casa*, but the chaparral was too near to admit of much ground for fear.

Edgar Lewis, however, was filled with the liveliest apprehension. Donna Luisa lay in his arms in a state of insensibility, and he did not see how they were to get her through the bushes rapidly enough to avoid the pursuers.

Don Manuel, too, would prove an incubance and the odds looked all against them.

They entered the trees with the pursuers still well in the rear and El Alacran at once showed his cunning. At the edge, the way was sufficiently open to admit of horseback riding, and the fugitives at once turned to the left and hastened on as fast as possible.

Edgar saw the object of the deviation at once. The soldiers would, of course, expect them to make straight for their refuge, and, unless they detected the maneuver, it bade fair to thwart them beyond question.

The continued unconsciousness of Donna Luisa troubled him and he mentioned his fears to El Alacran.

"She is doing well," was the terse reply, "and it is lucky for us it is so. We don't want a woman's screams at this time."

His voice was cold and unsympathetic and a warm reply trembled on Edgar's lips, but, remembering the state of affairs, he made a silent excuse for the brusqueness and held the girl closer in his arms.

At that moment he asked himself what would be the end of his passion for her, and then came a guilty feeling fast on the heels of one almost of indifference. Somehow, the old affection of the coast days seemed turning to ashes—or rather, the memory of it seemed far more tender than anything in the presence of the mad girl.

Then he blamed himself for letting his constancy waver, and all of his iron resolution arose to urge him to keep faith with one so afflicted.

"The tigers are abroad in full numbers, tonight," he just then heard one robber say to another, and the remarks called Edgar's attention to the repeated screaming of the terrors of the chaparral.

"I hope we won't have any trouble with them," was the uneasy reply; and the American instinctively pictured Donna Luisa in the power of the brutes until he ground his teeth and forced his mind to more activity.

By that time it was evident they had for the time thrown the soldiers off the track, and the chief began to consider the advisability of making for their refuge.

The chaparral, however, would admit of the passage of a horse only at certain points, and they must either ride further west or abandon them for a time. This he did not like to do, so they continued their way.

Edgar was ill at ease. He had considerable trouble in protecting Donna Luisa from the thorns by the way, the darkness was intense and oppressive, while the screams of the tigers ever and anon sounded so closely as to make him shudder.

El Alacran looked over his shoulder and finally fell back to Edgar's side.

"Would it not be well for me to relieve you of your burden for awhile?" he asked.

"No," was the quick reply. "She is mine and I must be the one to guard her."

"You are overtaking your strength."

"I do not feel it."

"Do Americans love like that?" asked the chief, in a deep voice.

"It is my way, at least."

"I hope fate will be kind enough to restore your Barbara to you."

"When such a thing occurs, I shall at once leave Mexico."

"Ah! And why so?"

"Human life is held too lightly in this land. I can bear it for myself, but not for the woman I love."

"Perhaps it would be best, and yet— But we will think of that anon."

"We shall do well to save our lives for now."

"I have little fear. We are almost to the bridle-path, and then, ho! for the cave."

"Shall we be safe there?"

"I think so. At any rate, I think the game is in our own hands. What sent these soldiers after us I don't know, but we can outwit them. Men call me the king of the chaparral and I can truthfully say I know every foot of the way."

Ten minutes later they reached the bridle-path and El Alacran went once more to the front. The way was still narrow and dark, so narrow that the bushes brushed the horses as they passed, but the animals had trod the path before and went on with confidence.

Once, the scream of a tiger almost overhead made Edgar start violently and he wondered what kept the animals from attacking them, but he had begun to gain confidence and the robbers took all coolly.

Their calmness was destined to be shaken, however, for, suddenly, something like a ball dropped upon the back of one of the horses, and as the frightened animal reared, uttering a loud snort, those in the rear knew by the yellowish hue of the ball that it was a tiger.

El Alacran, who was in front, took in the situation at one glance, and his sharp but calm voice arose above all other sounds.

"Don't fire; use your knives!" he cried, well knowing what a carbine-report would convey to the soldiers.

The luckless fellow who had received so dreadful a saddle-companion did not hear the words. He was too much alarmed for that, but his carbine had fallen to the ground, and, as the claws of the tiger tore one of his legs, he accepted the only chance when he drew his knife.

Somewhat oddly, the beast had singled out horse instead of rider, and his jaws were on the poor animal's throat even while he tore the robbers' leg with his claws.

His front was suddenly changed, however, as the rider drove the knife into his side with all his power, and, as he reversed ends, the horse screamed with agony and its master saw the flaming eyes of *el tigre* glaring into his own.

All this had occurred quickly, but enough time had been given for El Alacran to slip from his own saddle, and, as the tiger wheeled, he grasped the muscular throat with one hand and at the same time drove his knife to the hilt in the yielding flesh.

Another moment and the maddened horse had dislodged his double burden by a tremendous leap, and, as the two men and the tiger went down in a heap, the steed galloped away at full speed.

Edgar sat holding Donna Luisa in a close embrace, wholly at a loss to know what to do, but he was of as much use as the other men who circled confusedly about where their comrades were battling the chaparral terror.

The American could see nothing but death in store for El Alacran, for the rapid evolutions of the yellow ball showed it still full of life, but not a sound came from the chief and, in the darkness, they could not tell whether he was dead or alive.

The suspense ended, though, sooner than they had thought, and as the tiger had ceased his movements a man arose from the ground and coolly said:

"Look to Paulo, my braves. I fear the beast has slain him."

The speaker was El Alacran, who had slain the tiger, and he seemed none the worse for the battle.

CHAPTER XXXI.

FRESH PERILS.

THE tiger was slain, but it had cost the life of Paulo, upon whom the terrible claws and mouth had been busy while El Alacran's knife was doing deadly work, and the captain looked sadly down upon his faithful follower without thinking of the scratches he had himself received.

"Lay the body aside," he said. "It is madness to think of saving it, for, even if we had the time to carry it, the fresh blood would

bring a horde of tigers upon us. *Carrajo!* I cannot see why they are so active to-night."

Then he turned to Edgar and inquired after Donna Luisa whose appearance had not changed.

"I begin to fear for her," said the American. "So long a period of unconsciousness is not natural and I fear the worst."

"I hope it will be well," was the earnest reply.

"Do you apprehend trouble from this fight?"

"There was a good deal of noise and the runaway horse is liable to go until he falls dead or meets more tigers. If he keeps on he will run straight into the soldiers, and even now, his screams may have directed them this way."

"You fought like a gladiator."

"I fought for life," was the terse reply.

By this time the body had been laid aside and they resumed their way.

El Alacran went to the side of Don Manuel and removed his gag.

"Don't be rash enough to shout for help," he warningly said. "I want to ask if you know aught of these soldiers?"

"I know nothing," was the sullen reply.

"Is this the truth?"

"Yes."

"Then why are they after me so hot and sudden?"

"You ought to know, Juan Villena."

"How so?"

"Because you are El Alacran."

"*Caramba!* have you made so wonderful a discovery? I have never denied it; I am Juan Villena and El Alacran in one. What of it?"

"I wish I had known it before."

"Very likely, but you wish too late. I am not the original El Alacran, however. When I came to Mexico, a year ago, I assumed his office and his name at his request, because he was on his deathbed. Since then I have been working against you, for I wanted full information concerning my relatives before I claimed my rights. I know now that my brother, Leon, was murdered by you, Alberto Pareja and Roldan, the half-blood. For that deed you are all doomed. Pareja has already met his fate, and you and Roldan are my prisoners."

"You forget the soldiers."

"I will outwit them all."

"We shall see."

"At any rate your day is over, and when I get you in my den I will show you how strong a hand I hold."

"May Satan seize you first."

"Thanks, my dear cousin, but I want nothing of your guardian. However, this is no time for talking; there is other work to do. Shall I gag you again, or will you remain silent?"

"I will remain silent."

"Good. Carlos, if he cries aloud, sink your knife in his heart."

The speaker went again to the front, for they were fast nearing the neighborhood of the cave and some caution was needed.

Not far from there El Alacran again paused. He had heard a series of sounds in front, made up of growling and a peculiar rending noise, which needed no explanation.

"It is a batch of tigers engaged in a feast," he said. "Probably they have killed the runaway horse, which is fortunate for us, but they are directly in our path and it will not do to molest them."

"Let me make a detour at once," Edgar suggested.

The chief shook his head.

"The chaparral is not passable for horses except by this path. If we go around we must leave them."

"Let me go alone then. Donna Luisa must have shelter."

"We all need it, but you must not go alone. It would prove your doom. I suppose we shall have to abandon the horses, but I dislike to do it. I am inclined to think the best way is for me to go on a scout and see if our way is clear."

Edgar opposed such a delay, and after further discussion it was decided to leave the horses and all go together.

The American was pleased, but after going a short distance through the thick bushes, his courage and his strength began to fail. One of the robbers was helping to carry Donna Luisa, but Edgar's head began to swim and he knew he was overtaxing his physical powers.

Reluctantly enough, he surrendered the girl entirely to his allies and picked his way wearily through the tangled mass of undergrowth.

Another pause on the part of El Alacran brought all into a group.

"Did any of you hear a suspicious sound in advance?" he asked.

None of them had, but he knew he had unusually good hearing and was positive it had been the champing of a bit in a horse's mouth which had drawn his attention. He said as much and added:

"An examination of the ground in advance is imperatively necessary. It means ruin for us to run into the soldiers, and I am sure they are not far ahead. Don Edgar, do you feel like making a scout?"

"If you wish it," was the answer, as the American forgot his weakness in the excitement of the moment.

"Then you shall go to the left and I to the right. When you have advanced a hundred yards, pause and utter the signal I taught you the other day. I will answer, and this shall be the word for the men to follow. If you find the enemy, return at once."

"Very well," assented Edgar.

El Alacran gave some directions to the robbers and then they started.

The American pushed his way cautiously through the bushes, pausing frequently to listen, but no sound came to his hearing excepting the natural ones of the chaparral.

After going some distance he began to realize the magnitude of the venture he had undertaken. Unaccustomed to such work, surrounded by utter darkness and the dense wood, he could do no more than to pick his way blindly, and the possibility of becoming confused as to the points of compass struck him with full force.

For a moment he blamed El Alacran for sending him on such a mission, but the remembrance of all the man had done for him swept away the momentary doubt and he pressed forward.

He was just thinking he had gone the necessary hundred yards when he suddenly emerged from the denser part of the bushes and saw the lower line just ahead which marked the existence of the ridge.

He was surprised and confused. According to the idea he had of their situation before leaving his companions, he should have been some distance to the left of the ridge, but it now looked as though he had wandered far from his course.

While he stood in irresolution, a human figure suddenly emerged from the darkness of the lesser wood and advanced toward his refuge.

He was about to avoid discovery, but a second glance showed the new-comer to be Lady Jaguar and he quickly called her name.

She exhibited surprise at first, but, as he stepped forward, quickly hastened to his side.

"Don Edgar, why are you here?" she demanded, and her usually calm voice was full of anxiety.

"I am on a scout," he rather vaguely replied.

"Where are El Alacran and his men?"

He briefly explained the situation, but, learning from Lady Jaguar that he must have wandered widely from his course, was unable to locate them very clearly.

"The captain was right in his suspicions. The soldiers are here, and all around the cave, but they plainly know nothing of its situation. There is little danger that they will find it, but how your party is to enter unseen I do not know. I narrowly escaped discovery in coming out, but I was sure you would come by the western bridle-path and was resolved to warn you."

"Let us find El Alacran and be guided by his advice. Shall I sound the signal?"

She answered affirmatively, but no answer came to the elaborate call. All was silent in the chaparral save the cries of the tigers and other nocturnal brutes and birds.

Lady Jaguar shivered perceptibly.

"My heart is like lead," she said, faintly, "and I fear the worst. Three prisoners have to-night escaped from the cave, and if they happen on the soldiers our chances will be small."

"I wish Harold Dare was here," said Edgar, feeling at that moment that his friend would be a tower of strength.

"Wish for him if you will, but not for your other friend, Roldan, the half-breed. There is

more to be feared from him than all these soldiers."

"I think he would risk his life for me," said Edgar, stubbornly.

"You do not know him, Senor Lewis, or you would avoid him as you do a scorpion."

CHAPTER XXXII.

A SERIOUS MISHAP.

EDGAR did not answer, and then, at Lady Jaguar's suggestion, he again sounded the signal to the robber chief, but, if any answer was made, it was drowned in the cries of the tigers.

"We must go in search of them," said the Queen, "but I am filled with a cowardly fear I never felt before. Do you believe in presentiments of evil?"

"Not in the least. I have felt them myself, but they belong only to superstition, and are not to be relied upon. We will go to El Alacran, or—would it not be better for you to return to the cave?"

"I am not sure I could do so undiscovered, and I am so full of fear I dare not be alone. Let me stay with you, Don Edgar."

The American felt a sudden thrill at her words. She was no longer the calm, strong-nerved robber queen, but a weak woman, and it was not unpleasant to have her look to him for protection in such a crisis.

Somehow, too, in her fear, she reminded him of Barbara, as she had appeared on the day when she was rescued from the man-eaters of the coast, and had she been slight and willow-like of figure he might almost have fancied his lost girl by his side.

He pitied this Lady Jaguar in her peril, but, as a wave of something very much like tenderness swept over him, he aroused from his fancies with an angry start. The female outlaw was attractive at all times, with her intelligence, graceful ways, plump, well-rounded form and veil of mystery, but she was an outlaw still, and he would not allow himself to think of her.

If the reason of Donna Luisa remained permanently clouded, he would soon leave Mexico and its attractive women forever behind.

Then he remembered the dangers which environed them, the probability that they would never escape alive from the chaparral, and, losing his head for a moment, laid his hand on Lady Jaguar's arm.

"Will you do me one favor?" he asked.

"What can I do, Don Edgar?" she faintly asked, in a voice which seemed to answer, "I can do nothing."

"Remove your mask!"

"Impossible," she hastily said.

"And why impossible?"

"Because I have promised to remain masked for a time. When we—"

He interrupted with an impatient gesture.

"I am tiring of always being met with such excuses. You and El Alacran are hedged in by vague promises which baffle me at every turn."

"You are not angry, Don Edgar?"

Her voice was full of entreaty, and, man-like, he wavered.

"Not that, for I owe you too much to play such a part, but it seems as though you might trust me a little."

"I trust you more than you think, and I was about to say that when we reach the cave your wish shall be gratified. Besides, it would amount to nothing to unmask here."

"I accept the situation, Lady Jaguar, and now let us to action. I will signal once more before we go."

He did as he had said, but no answer came, so they began their search for El Alacran.

Edgar led the way, moving as Lady Jaguar directed, and for some time they picked their way through the underbrush.

Both knew that the prospect was not

bright. The girl knew little of the heart of the chaparral, and, in the darkness, they were liable to cross the narrow bridle-path without knowing it, so they relied mostly on the signaling part, but every time it was tried failure awaited them.

They were surprised and troubled at this, for it seemed as though El Alacran must have met with some mishap. He could not be far away, and, even with the noises of the wood to counteract their signals, there was no good reason why he should not hear and answer.

After some time the American suddenly paused.

"I fear we are lost again," he said.

"The path must be near."

"More likely we have crossed it already."

"Which way is the cave?" Lady Jaguar doubtfully asked.

"I do not know. I am completely turned around."

"Sancta Maria! what shall we do?"

"I am not sure but it would be as well for us to remain where we are until day."

"And so fall into the hands of the soldiers."

Edgar muttered a few words in English which expressed his opinion of the chaparral in a way more forcible than complimentary, adding an execration on the human enemy.

Then they resumed their way, but only a few yards had been traversed when he again paused. Once before that night he had heard the growling, rending sound which then came to his hearing, and he was not slow to perceive that they had wandered to where the tigers were making their meal on the dead horse.

The fact showed him they were in a dangerous vicinity, but it also proved that they were near the bridle-path and where he had left his allies.

A little careful search revealed the path, and then they turned their backs on the banqueting tigers and moved away with lighter hearts.

Having gone fifty yards, Edgar paused and confidently sounded his signal.

Then to his ears came the natural sounds of the chaparral—and nothing more.

"Where can they be?" Lady Jaguar nervously asked.

Where were they? It was a timely question, for, surely, if the robbers had not departed, they must have heard the signal.

"I can see but one way for us to do," he said, after a pause.

"What is that?"

"To go on to the cave. Probably El Alacran is already there, and we must trust to luck to avoid the soldiers."

"Let us go, then."

Edgar turned toward the north, but, at that moment, strong hands suddenly seized him, and, before he could resist, he was thrown forcibly to the ground.

He heard a cry from Lady Jaguar, and saw several men around him, and, with all his power, he endeavored to escape from their hold. He was strong and supple, and it was some little time before he was quieted, but, with such odds against him, it was a useless struggle, and in the end he found himself flat on his back, bound hand and foot.

At that moment his thoughts were more of Lady Jaguar than himself, but one glance showed her near at hand, held in the grasp of their enemies. Even in the darkness he could see they were soldiers, and he was tempted to shout aloud to warn El Alacran of the danger.

His captors muttered among themselves for a few moments, and then he was roughly set upon his feet. This done, two of the soldiers promptly shouldered him, and the party moved toward the cave while the bushes flapped mercilessly in his face.

He was full of fury, but a creeping child would not have been more helpless. He was hopelessly in the toils.

At the end of a few minutes they emerged from the denser chaparral into the track of the ridge, and then the American was seated upon a rock with Lady Jaguar near at hand.

The soldiers did not address them, and Edgar could see that the Queen was standing haughtily and calmly in the grasp of her captors, so he tried to govern himself by her example and await the next move in the drama.

Probably some of the soldiers had gone in search of the leader, for, after a short pause, a man of large size pushed his way through the others, who fell quietly back, and, even in the darkness, the American could see that he wore an officer's uniform.

"These are the prisoners, *capitan*," said a man at Edgar's side.

The new-comer looked from one to the other, and then centered his gaze on Edgar.

"Who are you, *senor*?" he asked, with brusque politeness.

"I am a man," was the dogged reply.

"And a prisoner," was the quick retort.

"As such it will be to your advantage to answer the questions I ask. What is your name?"

The American hesitated and looked at Lady Jaguar as though to find in her manner a suggestion as to the course he should pursue, but, of course, she said nothing.

"Before I answer," he said, concluding that stubbornness would avail nothing, "I would like to know why I have been set upon in such a lawless way. You wear the uniform of a soldier, which would seem to guarantee your good faith, but I am not aware that I have broken any law or deserved such usage."

"All this can be easily answered, *senor*. You have been seized as one of El Alacran's outlaws, and it remains for you to acknowledge your guilt or prove your innocence."

"I am no outlaw," was the haughty reply.

"Then why are you in Black Chaparral?" was the impatient retort.

"The same question will apply to you, *sir*."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

UNDER THE HARROW.

THE officer made an angry gesture.

"If you are a man of sense," he said, "you will not trifle in this way. I represent the legal government, and, as such, I have the power to make trouble for you. You say you are no outlaw. If such is the fact, why should you hesitate to speak freely?"

His reasoning struck Edgar forcibly, and he resolved to change his manner.

"I suppose I can explain, but, in return, I must ask my liberty. I am not a subject of Mexico, and, until I have committed a crime, you have no hold upon me. I am an American, and my name is Edgar Lewis. I was stopping in the village of San Pedro when, one night, I was waylaid, stabbed and left for dead by some bravo."

"Where did this occur?"

"Near the village, *captain*."

"Very well; what next?"

"When I recovered consciousness, I was in a cave of this chaparral—"

"Aha! And who else was there?"

"Men unknown to me, *senor*; but men who cared well for me until I recovered my strength."

"Were they not outlaws?"

"I did not ask."

"Proceed."

"To-night, these men bandaged my eyes and led me into the open air. After going for about half a mile, as near as I

can judge, the bandage was removed and I was told that I had only to go straight ahead and I would reach San Pedro."

"Proceed, *senor*."

"I was not alone when they left me, for in my company was the lady you see yonder. She, too, had been among them, and she was led out as I had been led. Her story I have not yet heard, for we were somewhat ill at ease with so many tigers about us, and we at once started to leave the chaparral."

"Proceed, *senor*."

"Our attempt was a failure, for we soon became hopelessly lost, and it was in that condition that you found us."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, *captain*."

The officer turned abruptly to Lady Jaguar.

"And you, *senorita*—how came you at the den of these remarkable men?"

"I am a resident of San Pedro, and when there I will tell my story," answered the girl, calmly.

"And why not now?"

"I do not care to confide my private affairs to any one except a magistrate."

"Why are you masked?"

"The mask was placed on my face at the cave."

"Will you remove it?"

"If you wish."

She raised her hand and seemed to make an attempt to obey, but suddenly desisted, with a fretful little exclamation:

"I do not understand it; I shall have to ask your aid, *senor capitan*."

"It is of no consequence," was the grim reply; "but I want to say I do not believe a word either of you say. Your stories have been glibly told, but they are not credible. I believe you are both members of El Alacran's band, and your mask, *senorita*, at once brands you as the notorious Lady Jaguar."

"Sancta Maria!" ejaculated the Queen, in a tone of horror.

Edgar had been reflecting rapidly. He knew that he had only to reach San Pedro to establish his identity, and though he had grave doubts in regard to Lady Jaguar, delay would be of benefit to them.

As for the little fiction he had told under the impulse of the moment, he felt it was not plausible, but Harold Dare could aid him a good deal by his testimony.

"The matter can easily be settled," he interrupted. "Take me to San Pedro, and if I am not what I say, let the law take its course."

"Yes," added Lady Jaguar, "take us to San Pedro, and if I do not prove that I am of good blood, and the equal of any in Mexico, then condemn me for an outlaw, if you will. Until then, your charges are an insult."

"Such innocence is charming, but I am too old a soldier to be hoodwinked. Alfonso Diaz is made of sterner stuff."

"A soldier of Mexico should not be unjust."

"Nor should he be like clay," retorted the officer, but his manner was kind for one of his calling, and they could not blame him for his lack of belief.

"Well, *Captain Diaz*, if such is your name we have made you a fair offer, and I do not see as we can do more," said Edgar.

"I propose that you shall do more; I propose to make you tell me where lies the den of El Alacran, even though it takes torture to bring out the secret."

His manner had grown suddenly stern and implacable, and Edgar quickly replied:

"Be careful, *captain*! I am an American, and, as such, I shall seek redress for any wrong you do me."

"Your Spanish is remarkably good for an American."

"I learned it in Madrid and I have

passports from more than one dignitary of old Spain."

Diaz did not answer, but stood looking straight into the darkness. He believed that his prisoners were Lady Jaguar and one of her followers—perhaps El Alacran, himself—and, as he had said, he was resolved to make them divulge the location of the cave if other means failed.

That this would be an easy task he did not believe, and, as time was valuable, he resolved to hold them as they were for a while and continue the search as before.

So he ordered the soldiers to bind them to the nearest trees, and they soon found themselves secured as directed despite their remonstrances.

Then Diaz and all his men except a guard of half a dozen went away and the prisoners had time for thought.

They were only a few feet apart, but, with the guards about, there was no chance for an exchange of opinion and sympathy. Edgar secretly tried his bonds, but they were too strong to be broken and he settled back with a sort of stubborn despair.

There seemed to be but one hope for them. If El Alacran had escaped capture, which seemed a certainty, he would not be likely to desert them, but he had a good deal with which to occupy his time and it would be rash for him to leave the cave if he had gained its shelter.

The minutes passed slowly until half an hour had worn away. Diaz had not returned and Edgar was busy with his thoughts which were far from pleasant. His own and Lady Jaguar's situation, the trouble of Donna Luisa, the peril of the robbers—all combined, made food enough for bitter thoughts.

In the midst of it all a touch upon his arm aroused him. He turned his head indifferently. It might be a robber, or the first fold of a life-destroying black snake—perchance, even a tiger—but he was past fear.

"Senor Lewis!"

The whisper, low and guarded, sent the blood suddenly coursing through his veins, and he impulsively started.

"Be silent, for the love of the Virgin! I have come to save you, but you must be very cautious. Do you know me? I am Roldan!"

Did Edgar know him? Did he know that familiar voice which, just then, sounded sweeter than any he had before heard, when it lowly uttered such cheering words in his ears?

Yes, he knew him well; there was no mistaking the voice of Roldan.

"Do not speak," continued the half-breed. "I will cut your bonds, and in a twinkling you and Lady Jaguar will be free. See! my knife is busy."

It was busy; and, as the bonds fell down at Edgar's feet, there was nothing but the presence of the soldiers to prevent instant escape.

Even in that respect they were fortunate. The men, not anxious to stand among the thick bushes, had gone a few feet into the clearer space and stood in a group, idly talking.

"Now move backward," continued Roldan. "Make no sound and all will be well."

"But Lady Jaguar—"

"Do you not see she is free? My friends are aiding her. All is well, senor, if you are cautious."

Edgar did see that other men were helping the Queen, and as he retreated, step by step, he saw the others moving in the same cautious way.

It was a moment of painful suspense. If the soldiers chanced to look around capture seemed inevitable, and, of course, Roldan and his allies would be victims of the same mischance.

"Roldan," said Edgar, "can you guide us from this infernal chaparral?"

"If necessary, senor, but, perhaps, we may not wish to go at once. We may go to the cave."

"But, my good man, to tell the truth, Lady Jaguar and El Alacran do not like you. They—"

"They think me what I am not, maybe; but my friend is talking to the Queen, and I think we shall all go the cave."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

EDGAR was somewhat disturbed at this plan. He knew El Alacran bitterly hated the half-breed, and, though his rescue of Lady Jaguar ought to weigh well with him, it did not seem that the chief would so easily be disarmed of his enmity.

He was not given a voice in the matter, however, for Lady Jaguar and her companions, who were the Wandering Jew and Felipe, came to his side, and the Queen announced that they would at once attempt to re-enter the cave.

Roldan was confident El Alacran and his party had already gained the refuge, so Edgar made no opposition to the plan.

Then followed a slow and cautious advance toward the rear entrance. Only their precautions saved them from discovery, for, more than once, the soldiers were seen near at hand, but none of them saw the fugitives, and the journey was safely made.

Having reached the entrance, they found a guard of robbers on duty, but, of course, the presence of Lady Jaguar was sufficient to gain ready admission for all, and the opening was again closed and secured.

At that moment El Alacran and half a dozen of his men appeared in the passage, and their looks showed they were going out on some errand; but the face of the chief lighted as he saw Lady Jaguar and Edgar.

It was succeeded by one of darker import at sight of Roldan, but the Queen glided to his side and spoke for a few moments in a rapid but subdued voice. He manifested surprise and looked keenly at Roldan and his companions, but she had evidently decided on some course of procedure, and he nodded his head several times at the close.

Then he called Edgar to his side, and Lady Jaguar went on to the interior of the place.

"Senor Lewis," he said, "I am happy to say that all is well. Donna Luisa and Manuel Villena are both inside, and there is no further danger from the soldiers. I suppose you wonder at my sudden disappearance from where you left me in the chaparral, but the appearance of the soldiers made flight necessary, and I succeeded in taking the whole party into the cave."

"And what of Donna Luisa?"

"I regret to say she is in a precarious condition. She has recovered from her swoon, but her mind is wandering a good deal, and I have grave doubts of her recovery. I wish you to go to her at once, if you will."

"Thank you, captain; I do wish it."

El Alacran gave a few orders to a subordinate, and he preceded Edgar along the passage to a room not previously occupied.

They entered softly.

The place was well lighted, and the American saw, first of all, an aged peon woman sitting by a couch, but she at once arose and came to their side.

"The senorita has fallen asleep," she whispered.

"Very well, Dolores. You can retire until I call you."

The woman obeyed, and then El Alacran pointed to the couch.

Edgar moved forward and stood, torn by painful emotions, by the bedside of the unfortunate girl. He saw her

lying with closed eyes, the long lashes drooping over her face—a face which was almost as pale as that of the dead, and it needed no doctor to tell him she was dangerously ill.

It was not that, however, which changed his look of anxiety and pity into one of peculiar nature—a fixed stare, in which could be seen amazement, incredulity, confusion and fear, and El Alacran, in the background, watched as the varying emotions swept over Edgar's face.

The American was dumfounded, for in the face of the mad girl he saw a great change from the bright and bewitching Barbara of the coast days.

She hardly looked like the same person. True, the eyes, the mouth, the chin, the whole face was the same, as was the ebon hair; but, somehow, the expression was so different that he could scarcely believe it all due to madness and bodily illness.

Instead, she looked more like another person, one exactly like Barbara to the casual glance, but lacking the inborn traits which only love could detect.

Was it Barbara? He asked himself the question, as though in a hushed whisper, and then turned mutely to El Alacran.

The chief moved to his side.

"What is it?" he gently asked, as Edgar remained silent.

"Is this Barbara?" was the husky answer.

"It is the same girl we took from the casa."

"But—but—"

He turned again to the girl and scanned every feature, while his face moved convulsively. Then a sudden and positive belief came to him.

"Captain," he whispered, like one in pain, "there is some terrible mistake. This girl is the very picture of the Barbara of whom I have told you, but it is not she!"

"Are you sure?"

"I am. I never saw such a resemblance in my life, but I know I have been mistaken. This is Donna Luisa, but not Barbara."

"Then you have all the time been on a false trail?"

"God help me, yes."

"Are you sorry?"

"Sorry? Let the remembrance of the time I have wasted here be your answer. This is a stranger to me, and, merciful Heaven, where is Barbara?"

"You thought this girl was she."

"True, but, until now, I have never seen her except in the darkness and that one brief moment before she fainted at the casa."

"I sympathize with you, Don Edgar," said El Alacran, touched at the misery pictured in his companion's face, "and I will try to help you when my own work is done. We may yet find Barbara, if such is your wish."

"Captain, if you will aid me in the work, I will make you a rich man," declared the American, his color coming back at the hope of finding the real Barbara, alive and well.

"Enough; I give my word, but, for now, I have work to do. Let us retire, and do you wait for me in your own room."

They passed outside, sent Dolores again to her charge, and then Edgar went as the chief had directed. He thought he would be alone, and was glad it was so, for he felt confused and unsocial, but, as he entered the room, he saw Lady Jaguar sitting near the light.

Their glances met, and then he uttered a few rambling words—what, he did not know.

"You look ill," the Queen said, gently. "I fear your strength has been overtaxed."

"I shall be well presently," he answered.

He sat down, and a short silence followed, which was broken by Lady Jaguar.

"I promised you, to-night, that when we reached the cave I would unmask. Do you still wish it?"

Something in her voice thrilled him and he quickly answered in the affirmative.

Then Lady Jaguar raised her hands, fumbled for a while about the mask and lifted it clear of her face.

Edgar Lewis sat for a moment like one paralyzed. Of all things on earth he had the least expected what he saw, but the sight was one which made the blood leap madly through his veins until it seemed as though he, too, was mad.

And no wonder, for, unless he was mad or dreaming, Barbara was before him!

One moment he yielded to confusion and doubt, and then sprung forward with outstretched arms.

"Barbara! Barbara!" he cried, and his whole soul was in the cry.

Then, with her lovely face made more lovely than ever by affection's light, the woman of mystery was folded in the arms of the man who loved her so well.

When calmness had returned he found himself still confused by many things and he began to utter questions too fast for answering.

"You wonder why you have never recognized me before," said Barbara, softly.

"I will tell you why. When I became Lady Jaguar, I assumed a disguise so cunning that others besides you have been deceived. Besides this mask, I changed my whole figure, and when art had made it stouter, I, of course, seemed much shorter, so there was nothing of Barbara there. Then I always used an assumed voice, one deeper and far different from my own, while the mask hid my whole face, so it was not strange you were at fault."

"And I mistook Donna Luisa for you," confessed Edgar, with manifest shame.

"Not so, for I am Donna Luisa!"

"You?" he ejaculated.

"Yes, Don Edgar. Now, let me at once relieve you of a new perplexity. The mad girl whom you have known as Luisa Villena was only an usurper of my identity and my rights. I am the only Luisa Villena."

She caressed his hand and smiled as he still looked confused.

"She was placed in my rightful position by Don Manuel. Why it was done you shall soon know, and other mysteries shall be explained when El Alacran comes."

CHAPTER XXXV.

IN WHICH DISCLOSURES THICKEN.

LADY JAGUAR and Edgar were alone for a half-hour longer before El Alacran came, a period of time which was full of happiness for them. The chief called at the door before entering and then looked keenly at both.

Barbara glided to his side and took his hand.

"All is well, Juan," she softly said.

"Praise the Virgin!" he thankfully answered, and then the girl joined their hands together.

"Don Edgar," she continued, "this is my uncle, Juan Villena."

The American remembered the name of the lost heir of the family and his quick mind grasped much of the mystery. Their hands lingered for a moment in a warm clasp and then the chief led each one to a seat.

"Let me make a brief explanation," he said, addressing Edgar. "As has been said, I am Juan Villena and the uncle of this lady, but, until a year ago, I had not seen her for twelve years. When she was a child of only five and I a stripling, I abruptly left my home and entered on a life of wild adventure, though not of

crime. I saw almost every land and water of the known world, but, a year ago, returned to my native land, from which I had not once heard while away.

"Strange news awaited me when I secretly arrived, for I learned that my brother Leon had ten years before met a conspirator's fate. This story you have yourself heard, so I need not repeat it; but, from the first, I felt convinced that there was a dark mystery somewhere. Leon Villena was not a man of traitorous inclinations, and I could but feel he had been the victim of a wicked plot.

"Consequently I resolved to remain unknown and quietly investigate affairs. This I did, and my first discovery was that my niece, Donna Luisa, was in peril from the plots of Don Manuel. It was his pet idea to marry her to Alberto Pareja, and so secure her wealth beyond question; but she very properly hated Pareja, and was struggling desperately but quietly against their plans.

"About this time I learned that Alacran, the outlaw, was an old acquaintance of mine, and I became his guest; and when he soon after died, I was unanimously elected in his place. I took the office and his identity at one and the same time, but no outsider has ever suspected the fact.

"My second discovery came when I interested myself in the case of an aged peon woman who was dying in extreme poverty and neglect, and from her I learned a strange story. It was, in substance, that on the night Leon Villena escaped from prison she had by chance been a witness to the affair; and she had seen that his allies were Don Manuel, Alberto Pareja and Roldan, the half-breed, but the sequel showed that their motive had been a fiendish one.

"They took him from the fort; but, once outside, set upon him, bound him hand and foot and flung him into the river to meet a death which would forever remove him from their path.

"Of course the woman dared not tell the story to the authorities, with the power of Manuel against her, and she kept silent until she told all to me on her death-bed.

"I now had the whole case in my grasp, and I began to weave my net about the plotters, but the sudden disappearance of Donna Luisa delayed the final act. You know, Senor Lewis, how she fled to the coast, where you met her, and how she abruptly left when Alberto Pareja appeared on the scene.

"She fled from him, but he followed that night and overtook her by the sea. They had a bitter interview, which ended in his becoming so furious that he flung her bodily into the water, and then left in the darkness, thinking she had drowned.

"She was, however, a strong swimmer and easily reached shore. Once there, she resolved to return to San Pedro and seek justice from the authorities, but on her arrival we met, and the result was she joined her fortunes with mine, becoming Lady Jaguar, and we worked on together.

"In the mean while her enemies had played a shrewd game. They had found a girl who was the very picture of Luisa, and she was easily induced to represent the real heiress. Some trouble in her past had unsettled her reason, but her madness was of a mild form, and rather to their advantage than otherwise. It was this girl, whose real name is Paula Avilla, whom you chanced upon, and seeing her only by night, mistook for your Barbara.

"One mystery still remains unexplained. My niece, in her character of Lady Jaguar, has told you that even if you could see Barbara in her right mind, there would still be an unsurmountable obsta-

cle to a union with her. I will tell you why: Before she fled from *casa Villena* her enemies one night drugged her and forced her to marry Alberto Pareja. At least there was such a ceremony, though it could be but a mockery at the best, and I am glad to say we have proved that the man who officiated as priest was nothing but a peon hired to represent a holy man.

"Luisa was allowed to go to her room, and, once there, she began to recover from the drug, and was filled with horror at the idea of being the wife of Pareja. Her mind became active, and, securing a sum of money, she fled from the house and to where she met you.

"Now, you understand her periods of bitterness and melancholy when at the coast, and what 'Lady Jaguar' meant when she referred to an obstacle between you two. She loved you from the first, and, believing that affection hopeless, she was often moody and desperate.

"However, as I have said, the marriage was no marriage, and the death of Pareja settled all doubt in that quarter. He died sooner than I had intended, for I was playing ghostly tricks on him to frighten him into a confession of Leon Villena's murder, but, thank Heaven, the confession is not needed. Shall I tell you why?"

Edgar answered in the affirmative.

"Because Leon Villena still lives!"

Edgar looked astonished, but the speaker smiled and rapidly continued:

"In some way the old peon woman made a mistake, and I have all along wronged the half-breed, Roldan. He did not aid to send Leon to his fate. On the contrary, he was true as steel, and when Don Manuel sent him away, before the tragedy, he hovered near, and, when Leon was flung into the river, he plunged in and rescued him from drowning.

"My brother, however, was nearly dead, and when Roldan had borne him to a *jacale*, he worked over him an hour before consciousness returned. High fever succeeded, and for days he was delirious, during which time the close-mouthed Roldan cared for him alone and unceasingly.

"One day he awoke from a brief slumber to find his patient gone, and, search where he would, he could find no trace. Leon had vanished completely, and after awhile the half-breed gave him up as dead and went back to his old life, not daring to tell any one that Manuel Villena was a murderer.

"As for Leon, ten years of oblivion followed his terrible adventure—a blank from which he finally awoke, after a severe illness, to find himself in one of the United States, and people told him he had long been wandering about, crazed and ragged, calling himself the Wandering Jew and living by begging."

"The Wandering Jew?" exclaimed Edgar.

"Exactly, senor; the Wandering Jew is Leon Villena. Well, to continue: He remembered all Manuel had done to him, and he resolved to return to San Pedro in the same disguise he had used in his madness, and, as the Wandering Jew, look the field over before revealing his identity.

"How he came here you know, for you met him before any of us, and there is little to tell of his course since arriving. Once he went by night to *casa Villena* and searched in a secret drawer for the family jewels, but the secret place was too complicated for him, and it remained for me, aided by information gained from the old peon woman, to secure them.

He finally revealed his identity to Roldan, who aided him all he could, and as the half-breed had finally gained the idea that Lady Jaguar was the real Luisa, developments have rapidly ensued during the last two hours.

"The sun is at last shining for us all."

Leon is alive and well, and so is Luisa, while I am supremely happy to know that my brother will once more have his own.

"The soldiers who have bothered us so much are now *en route* for San Pedro. They were sent to the adjoining town by the Government at the request of Leon, who thought he might require them to conquer Don Manuel, and their chase of us was unauthorized; so they have willingly departed at the word of my brother.

"Manuel is in another room, ruined, undone, exposed and in despair. He will trouble us no more, for he is as helpless as dead Alberto Pareja, though, unlike that wretch, he may be made to expiate his crimes.

As for the mad girl who impersonated Luisa, none of us feel any bitterness toward her, and, if she recovers from her present illness, she shall be well cared for while she lives. Now, Don Edgar, you know all."

Yes, Edgar Lewis knew all, and knowing the happiness which had come to the deserving of the house of Villena, and seeing Donna Luisa—his Barbara—looking into his face with her splendid eyes, the light of perfect peace fell around him like a gift from Heaven.

Then the "Wandering Jew" and Roldan were called in and they came to add their happy faces to the group.

Edgar would never have recognized the man of rags and mania in the strong, erect and impressive shape of Leon Villena, but he could but see that the father of Barbara was a noble man, while the *hidalgo's* manner plainly revealed his liking for his prospective son-in-law.

Roldan received his share of attention and El Alacran tried to make amends for what wrong he had done him. Luckily, the truth had come soon enough to prevent serious trouble, and there was a general laugh over the affray of that evening which was terminated by the staff of the Wandering Jew.

Edgar went with Juan when he conducted Don Manuel to his dungeon. The plotter had relapsed into sullen silence, and nothing could be more complete than his downfall. Alberto Pareja was dead, their long-nourished schemes had forever fallen through, and the law would beyond doubt deal un pityingly with the man who had caused so much mischief.

Rest was needed by all and they retired with the understanding that they were to start for *casa Villena* at noon.

This arrangement was carried out and the Villena had no trouble in taking possession of their property. The soldiers were there to see justice done, but their aid was not needed and the family returned peaceably to their own.

Edgar and Harold Dare met once more, and the latter was like a school-boy over the good fortune of his friend. Events had transpired marvelously strange but well, and no cloud appeared on the sky of the future.

We need not further prolong our story.

The triumph of Leon Villena was complete, and, as no one disputed his identity, he at once settled down to a quiet and peaceful life.

Juan had disbanded his men, and from that time the brothers lived in perfect accord.

Manuel was given a life sentence for his crimes, but died at the end of four years.

Paula Avilla recovered from her illness, and her mind nearly resumed its old power, but she had had enough of the world, and soon entered a convent. She was never blamed by our friends for aiding Don Manuel's plots when the mantle of madness was upon her.

Everything was done for Roldan that respect and gratitude could suggest, and

Felipe and all who had aided Leon came in for a share of his favor.

Edgar and Donna Luisa were at once married, but it was a year later when they left *casa Villena* for his Northern home; and in after years they annually visited her parental home and enjoyed the hospitality of Leon and Juan. Occasionally Harold Dare went with them, but his law business in New York was enough to occupy most of his time.

The brothers Villena grew still richer on their *hacienda*, and those who to-day respect them so much have never suspected the identity of El Alacran and Lady Jaguar.

THE END.

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